

1-1-1991

Motivation and commitment among adult learners enrolled in an adult basic education class : the life histories of five adult learners.

Sharon A. Santilli
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1

Recommended Citation

Santilli, Sharon A., "Motivation and commitment among adult learners enrolled in an adult basic education class : the life histories of five adult learners." (1991). *Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014*. 4806.
<https://doi.org/10.7275/14755051> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/4806

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

UMASS/AMHERST



312066008658589

MOTIVATION AND COMMITMENT AMONG ADULT LEARNERS ENROLLED IN
AN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION CLASS: THE LIFE HISTORIES OF FIVE
ADULT LEARNERS.

A Dissertation Presented

by

SHARON A. SANTILLI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

September 1991

School of Education

© Copyright by Sharon Ann Santilli 1991

All Rights Reserved

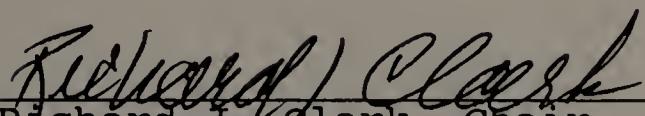
MOTIVATION AND COMMITMENT AMONG ADULT LEARNERS ENROLLED
IN AN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION CLASS: THE LIFE HISTORIES OF
FIVE ADULT LEARNERS

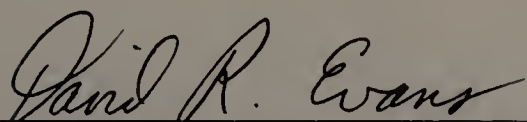
A Dissertation Presented


by

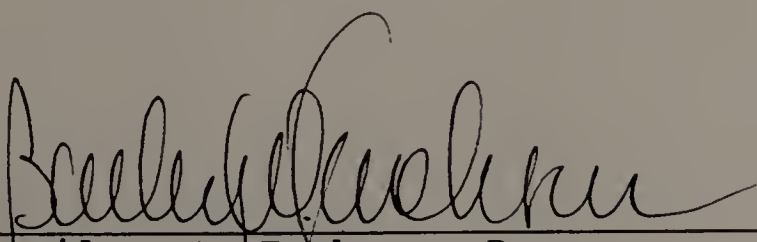
SHARON A. SANTILLI

Approved as to style and content:


Richard J. Clark, Chair


David R. Evans, Member


Gareth Matthews, Member


Bailey W. Jackson, Dean
School of Education

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would literally not have been possible without the contribution of the five participants whose life stories are contained herein. My heartfelt appreciation to Louis Johnson, Gloria Rodriguez, Sally Wagner, Michelle Davis and James Freeman for agreeing to share their intimate stories with us.

I thank my chairperson, Richard E. Clark, who has been genuinely supportive and inexhaustibly encouraging throughout this entire process. He is an advisor in the truest sense of the word and he has been a friend. At the same time my sincere appreciation goes to David Evans and Gareth Matthews for their patience as I struggled to complete this work long distance. Thank you to William Fanslow for his seventh hour rescue.

Finally, I thank my partner in life, Keith McGill. Without his support, which has been complete and unfailing, I would not have achieved my goal.

ABSTRACT

MOTIVATION AND COMMITMENT AMONG LEARNERS ENROLLED IN AN
ADULT BASIC EDUCATION CLASS: THE LIFE HISTORIES OF FIVE
ADULT LEARNERS.

SEPTEMBER 1991

SHARON A. SANTILLI, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF
MASSACHUSETTS/BOSTON

M.Ed., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS/AMHERST

Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS/AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Richard J. Clark

This research project emerged from the researcher's work as an adult basic education instructor in a community learning center. With an inordinately high attrition rate (over seventy percent), the researcher's attention was easily focused on the small number of students who remained in the Learning Center and attended classes consistently. This group of five learners became the self-selected participants in the study.

The purpose of the study was to examine the life experience of the five learners to gain insight into the nature of their motivation and commitment to learn. A series of up to six, one hour interviews were conducted with each of the participants. During the interviews, participants reflected on both past and present experience. Although it varied from person to person, discussions

included childhood and family experience, prior school and educational experiences.

Conclusions drawn from the research are not easily categorized. Motivating factors were different for each learner; one was motivated by a life-altering illness and another by the realities of finding employment without a high school diploma. The most salient insight gained from the research, however, was the similarity of experience across participants with issues related to dysfunctional families, personal violence, and substance abuse.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
Chapter	
INTRODUCTION	1
1. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY	4
Development of The Harris School/Community Learning Center	4
Background to the Study	11
2. MOTIVATION AND PERSISTENCE IN ADULT EDUCATION ..	13
3. METHODOLOGY	25
Philosophical Underpinnings	25
Rationale	28
Participants	32
Procedures	33
Contact with Participants	33
Interview Structure	35
Transcription	42
Working with the Interview Material	44
Preparing the Life History Narratives	45
4. LIFE NARRATIVES OF FIVE ADULT LEARNERS	50
Louis Johnson	52
Gloria Rodriguez	90
Sally Wagner	129
Michelle Davis	146
James Freeman.....	177
5. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION	194
What do the Life Histories of the Five Learners Say about the Issues of Motivation and Commitment?	196
Emergent Themes in the Life Histories	202

Class, Gender and Race	202
Dysfunctional Families, Violence and Substance Abuse	206
The Mystique of the GED	208
What do the Life Histories say to Adult Basic Education Practitioners?	212
6. REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS	215
Methodological Considerations	215
What Kind of Truth do you Get?	215
The Relationship between Researcher and Participant	216
Conclusion	218
APPENDIX: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	223
BIBLIOGRAPHY	225

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation has been a long time coming. For some time, I thought my dissertation would evolve from the research project of the Math/English/Science Teacher Education Project (MESTEP¹) with which I was integrally involved while completing my coursework at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. When I decided to relocate to Key West, Florida, I was not at all sure what would happen to my dissertation. I pursued several avenues, but none of them seemed to lead anywhere. None seemed to feel quite right.

Then, through my work with the Adult Education Program in Key West, I stumbled upon the idea that would become the focus of my dissertation. I had been working in the administrative office of the program, but as I moved into instructional areas, certain questions began to arise. One of the questions foremost in my mind concerned the fact that many of the people who enrolled in our classes were never seen again after the first week of class. People would register for class, attend for a week or two and then disappear.

¹MESTEP stands for Math/English/Science Teacher Education Project. The Project is funded by FIPSE and under the direction of Richard Clark in the School of Education. The research portion of the project was directed by Earl Seidman.

I went through a period of self-doubt. Was there something we were doing that was alienating or discouraging? Were we awful people? Why didn't students like us? Maybe it is the other instructors. Maybe it's me! Once I got through this stage, I began to see the patterns for what they were--patterns of adult learners--and I also began to see something else. A handful of the adults who had enrolled were coming to class after the first week and after the second, third and fourth weeks; and they were coming every single day.

Given the context, I decided these few people were special and I was not sure why. They certainly were different from the "norm" and I really did not understand what kept them coming. It seemed the only way to understand this phenomenon would be to inquire into it and into the lives of the people involved. So completing the circle I began in my work with MESTEP, I found myself designing an interview project to ascertain what motivated this small group of learners, why they seemed so committed and why they were so different from the majority of adults who enroll in the Learning Center.

I was in familiar territory. The conditions and population were obviously different, but I had had the experience of conducting fairly lengthy interviews with students in MESTEP. As a result of that experience, I came

to understand that interviewing the adult learners in our Learning Center would be the only feasible way to gain the type of insight I sought. There is so much to be learned when people tell their stories; nothing seems irrelevant or unimportant.

As this study took form and I began to see something tangible emerge I finally felt that I had made right decision. Many times, I had had serious doubts about ever finding a research interest and completing my dissertation. I had misgivings about the decision I made to relocate in the midst of the doctoral process. But, a little piece of pastel cardboard that my fifth-grade teacher had posted on our classroom wall used to flash in my mind sometimes. It said: "Bloom where you are planted."

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Development of The Harris School/Community Learning Center

Since February 1989, I have been working with the Monroe County Adult Education Program in Key West, Florida. From March to September 1989, I worked in the director's office and my responsibilities were mostly in the area of administrative and technical support for the program. Since September 1989, I have been working in the daytime adult education program at the Harris School in Key West. The Harris School, a former elementary school, had been closed for some years and was leased to our adult education program in the fall of 1989 for day classes in Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Education Development (GED) preparation and English as a Second Language (ESL). With the exception of these three, the remainder of adult education classes are held in the evening at the local high school.

The day before the beginning of the fall term 1989, some of the staff from the office went by the Harris School to check on the setup of the classroom and computer lab. When we arrived, we found that the furniture and computer equipment had been piled up in a corner of the main room (the former library) and virtually nothing had been done to

prepare the facility for classes. At that point, there was no recourse other than to do it ourselves. So we rolled up our sleeves and for the remainder of that day the four of us moved furniture, set up computer equipment, rolled carpeting, cleaned, dusted, vacuumed, put up curtains and readied the facility for the students arriving the next day.

During the fall term, I taught an introductory computer skills class which met Monday through Thursday from 9a.m. to noon. I continued working in the director's office for the remainder of the day. During this time, I began to realize that I much preferred being in the classroom to working in the administrative office. As a result, I asked the director if we could make a change in the scheduling of daytime courses. He agreed and beginning in the January term, I shortened the computer class to one and a half hours and for the remainder of the morning, I began to work with the ABE and GED preparation classes. And thus began a relationship with a small group of students that would lead me to the research for my dissertation.

Both of these classes had been taught by another instructor and I was uncertain about the transition. The students had gotten accustomed to one instructor and a set schedule and we were about to change everything. At the time, I was not at all sure how they would react,

especially to me. As it turned out, however, things went fairly smoothly. There were obstacles to overcome and disappointments (mostly for me), but we all eventually settled into a mutually beneficial relationship until the end of the school year.

The students in the ABE and GED classes were an extremely heterogenous group. We have, in the past, attempted to establish entrance criteria for each of these classes based on performance on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). We tested everyone who entered the program, and people tended to cluster around a variety of grade levels. Nevertheless, it was not effective to conduct large group instruction since learners have different academic weaknesses and different levels of prior schooling and education. Age was also a consideration in our instructional approach. We had students who varied in age from 16 to 65. An 18- year-old young man who recently dropped out of school has different needs from a 55-year-old woman who dropped out of school in 1947.

Although there was very little large-group instruction, from time to time, we organized small group instruction around specific skills, like fractions, punctuation, or testing skills. However, for the most part our approach was "guided individualized instruction." We

organized the Learning Center so that students would be active participants in their own education.

We instructed everyone on ways to monitor one's own progress. After an initial assessment of strengths and weaknesses, students began working on those skills they needed to improve. We met with everyone periodically to assess improvement. As instructors, we were available for one-on-one tutoring as needed. We relied heavily on computer-assisted instruction, although we also used additional written materials. All of our students learned to use both Apple and IBM computers in the time that they were with us.

In July 1990, another dimension was added to our daytime program. Through a joint venture between the Adult Education Program and the Handicapped Job Placement Council of the Florida Keys, and supported in part by a grant from the Private Industry Council of Miami, we instituted a Remedial Education/On-the-Job-Training (RE/OJT) program. The purpose of this program is to upgrade the basic skills of people who have dropped out of school and to provide them with baseline training to ease their entrance into the job market.

Students in this program are in remedial education for six to fourteen weeks. At the completion of this of the first-phase of the program, they are assisted in finding

employment. Students must agree to stay on the job for four months after they begin working in order to fully complete the program.

With the institution of the Remedial Education/On-the-Job Training (RE/OJT) Program, the structure and curriculum of the Learning Center were reorganized, (although "organized" is probably more accurate.) We began with three staff members: two coordinators/ instructors--another woman and I-- and one ESL instructor. We shared a counselor, receptionist/ secretary and job placement coordinator with the Handicapped Job Placement Council. Before July, our approach in the ABE and GED classes was quite informal. We, students and staff, were as Freire and Myles Horton have said, "making the road by walking."

There was very little administrative structure in place at the school before this time. We spent 95 percent of our effort on instruction. However, in July, we were beginning to develop an administrative or, more accurately, a bureaucratic structure, with rules, regulations and requirements. We also felt it was

important to identify ourselves as an independent entity, so we changed the name of our facility from the Harris School to the Community Learning Center.

The curriculum in the Remedial Education/On-the-Job-Training program consists of academic instruction in basic skills in the morning session and employability skills, introductory computer/word processing instruction in the afternoon session. Admission to the program is based on two criteria: being in need of basic skills remediation (math, reading and language) - which is measured as testing below the eighth-grade level on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), being classified as economically disadvantaged and/or being handicapped in some way.

After this brief overview of our programs, it is important to make some clarifications before proceeding with the discussion. While the RE/OJT program now occupies the majority of my time as a more or less full-time employee, when the idea for my study was evolving, I was working only part-time at the Learning Center, teaching an ABE/GED class and a computer skills class.

Many of the students in the Learning Center, and three of the participants in my research, who were originally enrolled only in ABE or GED classes, were also participants in the RE/OJT program. All interviews and most of the actual research took place after July 1990 and the

inception of the RE/OJT program, but my relationship with the participants began six months earlier. Our program, myself and the learners are now quite different from what they were prior to July 1990. Although difficult to sustain, I have tried to limit the discussion of my research to the earlier period of time and the conditions that existed then.

Background to the Study

Since I began working with the Learning Center, the most perplexing problem has been student attrition. People would enroll in classes, even attend the first few sessions, but by far the majority would not last for two weeks. At first, I was only an observer of this phenomenon. But as I became more integrally involved in the day-to-day functioning of the Learning Center, this phenomenon became more important and more disturbing.

The total population of adults who enroll in our classes can be classified into three groups: 1) those who enroll and never return to class (30%); 2) those who enroll and attend sporadically (anywhere from once or twice a week to once or twice a month (60%); and 3) those who enroll and attend virtually everyday (10%). The numbers have varied within these three categories from time to time, but the proportions have remained fairly consistent.

As of January 1990, a total of 29 people were registered for the GED, ABE, and ESL classes. Of that number, 16 were GED/ABE students, and the remainder were enrolled in ESL. The Adult Education Program subscribes to an open entry/open exit policy, therefore new students can and do register for and begin classes at the Learning Center each day. Although the on-paper enrollment - that

is, people who have at least registered for class - at one point reached 50, the number of consistently attending students was quite low.

The drop-out problem is certainly not unique to our program. Attrition is an issue many adult education programs confront. This can be accounted for, in part, due to the fact that most adult education pursuits are voluntary; people are under no obligation to come in the first place or to continue once they begin.

Nevertheless, in our case, where the dropout rate has at times been as high as 90 percent, anyone attending even sporadically is exceptional, and those who attend virtually every day are, in my opinion, extraordinary. From January to June 1990, there was a handful of students, six to be specific, who stood out for this reason. On many days, with the exception of the instructors, they were the only ones in class. It is these extraordinary individuals who are the focus of this study.

CHAPTER 2

MOTIVATION AND PERSISTENCE IN ADULT EDUCATION

"Adult education" is a somewhat encompassing term that refers to various types of learning and educational pursuits. An evening class in autobody repair or basic drawing, college courses leading to a master's degree, literacy and other basic skills classes are all within the domain of adult education. The problem is not that one particular definition is better than another. The definition can change depending upon the context and the specific population of adults that are targeted.

As Brookfield (1986) points out, "[N]arrow notions of what constitutes adult learning and education reflect auditing procedures and administrative convenience rather than the complex, multifaceted reality of adult learning itself" (p.5). He believes that "...adults are continually engaged in purposeful learning in familial, interpersonal, community activist, recreational and occupational settings" (p.8).

There are many topics subsumed within the field of adult education. Adult learning, whether from a psychological, sociological or developmental orientation, is probably the largest area of interest and research in adult education. It is important to state that while I

believe all aspects of an adult education endeavor are fundamentally related--theories of learning, characteristics of learners, instructional approaches--this was a study of participation, and, more specifically, persistence. I have, therefore, tried to limit the literature presented in this section to that which addresses these issues.

The question of what constitutes "participation" in adult education is certainly debatable, since an adult is often involved in a wide range of learning activities even though they may not all be considered "formal" education. Rockhill observes that, "The problem of defining participation 'in what' has resulted in statistics which vary greatly depending upon the openness of the definition used in determining an adult educational activity" (p.6). Generally speaking, predictions from studies on participation in adult education or in any other field are dependent upon the definitions, parameters, and limitations set by the researchers.

The population of participants in this study is limited to adults enrolled in a formal program of Adult Basic Education (ABE)/remedial education. However, much of the research on participation in adult education is based on activities that would fall into the category of lifelong learning, that is educational activities other than ABE;

relatively few studies have been devoted to learners in ABE settings specifically.

Findings from these settings, such as the statement that the "average" participant in an adult learning activity is likely to have been better educated or have come from the middle or upper middle class, are not germane to adult basic education settings.

"Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) note, for example, that 'adults who take part in literacy or job training programs are very different from those who engage in part-time study in universities,'... A piano lesson, learning to read, taking a credit course in physics...all would be considered participation. It is quite possible, however, that different learning activities have different sociodemographic and motivational roots" (Merriam and Caffarella, p.75).

Studies of participation, persistence and motivation among adults enrolled in formal or informal learning activities abound. Brookfield states:

"Judging by the number of journal articles, dissertations, and studies devoted to it, the topic of participation in adult learning is probably the most enduring research concern since investigation of this field began" (p.3).

Similarly, Rockhill (1982) agrees that,

"[p]articipation and drop-out have been major concerns of adult education researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners who struggle with the problems of recruitment and retention" (p.3).

The "cornerstone" study of participation was conducted in 1965 by Johnstone and Rivera and in its final form the

"sample" included twelve thousand participants. This study established many of the fundamental guidelines by which subsequent studies of participation in adult education were conducted. Of importance, is the profile they put forth of the "typical" adult learner:

"The adult education participant is just as often a woman as a man, is typically under forty, has completed high school or more, enjoys an above-average income, works full-time and most often in a white-collar occupation, is married and has children, lives in an urbanized area but more likely in a suburb than a large city..." (Merriam and Caffarella, p. 64).

There have been several other landmark studies on this subject since 1962 including periodic surveys conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (1969 through 1984) and one conducted by the College Entrance Examination Board (1980). These studies have attempted to compose profiles of the "typical" adult learner, to establish criteria by which adult education activities are defined, and to measure participation and persistence rates.

While there is no shortage of research on participation and retention in adult education, the vast majority of this research, including many of studies cited above, is clearly quantitative in nature. Such studies generally seek to establish causal relationships, for example, between participation and retention, or participation rates and socioeconomic and demographic

variables, with the ultimate goal being to make predictions of one sort or another (Morstain & Smart, 1974 and Clayton & Smith, 1987).

Several studies have employed survey research and other quantitative methods to construct typologies or categories of participants and nonparticipants (Boshier, 1971), or to establish criteria for the identification of "at-risk" students to improve recruitment and retention strategies (Bross, 1985; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1979, 1985; and Hoffee, 1985).

Bruder (1989), in an article on dropout prevention among high school students, asserts that students drop out of school for a variety of reasons, many of which can be subsumed under issues of low self-esteem and chronic substance abuse. She cites a variety of other reasons including: learning disabilities, being kept back, working, poor performance, living in a single parent home, behavior problems, welfare, language barriers and pregnancy. As will become clear from reading their life history narratives, participants' reasons for dropping out of school are among those most commonly cited.

The Darkenwald and Merriam study (1982) acknowledges the importance of prior experience, pre-existing factors if you will, that affect participation and motivation in adult educational activities. Their model proposes other factors

to consider, such as "readiness," "barriers to participation," referring to responsibilities such as having young children, working full-time, etc., "stimuli to participation" and "socioeconomic status." But the two factors related to motivation and persistence that are most closely tied to prior experience are "individual and family characteristics," and "the amount and quality of preparatory education and socialization" (Cervero & Kirkpatrick, 1990).

A great deal of the research on participation in adult education is actually on nonparticipation (Cross 1981, Courtney, 1991. On the subject of what motivates adults to participate in learning activities, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found that 83 percent of their sample stated that some sort of a life change prompted them to pursue adult education. The remaining 17 percent were involved in learning "for its own sake."

Beder and Valentine (1990) combined their survey of 351 adult basic education students with a sample of qualitative interviews. Their study resulted in a proposed "ten factors of motivation" including both intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors. The ten dimensions of motivation are: self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion, literacy development, community/church involvement, job advancement, launching (restructuring

one's life in some way), economic need, educational advancement, and the urging of others.

In the study sample, they identified six clusters or categories of adult basic education students which they labelled "Mainstream Women", "The Urged", "Young Adults", "The Climbers", "Least Affluent and Least Employed", and "Low Ability Strivers." In discussing the implications of their research, despite the insights they may have gained, they add, "Only by understanding and responding to the expressed motivations of learners can we hope to make ABE congruent with the social meaning learners attach literacy and literacy education" (p 94).

In a study employing factor analytic research, Boshier (1971, 1976) found two categories of adult learners: those who are "life-chance" oriented and those who are "life-space" oriented. He claimed that life-chance orientation could be associated with sporadic participation in adult education in order to cope with life's problems; whereas life-space oriented people are most often continuous participants (Rockhill, p.7).

These are but a few examples of the ample research on participation and persistence among adult learners. Cervero and Kirkpatrick comment on one of the weaknesses of studies of participation in adult education.

"Fewer [studies] still had asked respondents the kind of questions that would allow deeper inquiry into the underlying factors that may contribute to participation in adult education. As a result, the bulk of studies addressing the topic of participation have failed to provide a very meaningful depiction of adult participants in educational activities" (p. 78).

One wonders what contribution all this work has made to understanding the complex issues related to adult learning and those participate in its various forms. Analyzing the data from the 1975 NCES survey, Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) came to the conclusion that

"only 10 percent of the variance associated with participation and persistence could be accounted for statistically. In other words 90 percent of whatever it is that leads adults to participate in and drop out from adult education has not been identified..." (p.75).

Cross (1979) is also skeptical of the usefulness and contribution of new knowledge such studies make to the field of adult education. She states:

"By now, we should know a great deal about adults' learning interests. But it is probably more accurate to say that we know quite a bit about a rather limited aspect of adult learners' motivations and interests. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that what we have are thirty variations of the same study" (p.4).

In her review of the research on drop-outs from ABE, Clark (1986) observed that much of the research on attrition and retention in ABE has attempted to examine specific variables in isolation. When this is done it is often at the expense of something potentially more

revealing: the interaction of one factor with other related factors. She also adds that conclusions about attrition and retention among adult learners are usually based on the opinions of teachers and administrators and rarely consider the perspectives of ABE students.

Rockhill (1982) draws attention to need to be aware of "value imposition" in research on participation in adult education, explaining that at times research is grounded in understandings gleaned from the literature and not in the perspectives of the people who are participating. Bagnall (1989) suggests that perhaps we need to reorient research from counting the numbers of participants to documenting the nature and extent of learners' involvement in the educational activity (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991, p. 74).

In order to reach an understanding that goes beyond isolating the "specific variables" and that seeks to uncover the interaction of factors of a person's experience, it is necessary to access the perceptions, motivations, beliefs and values, in short, the "life-world" of the individual (Stanage, 1987). The nature of human experience is often inaccessible, or unimportant in quantitative research. "Statistics that tabulate data such as education, income, occupation, and attitude provide correlations but leave no sense of person, let alone the meaning of correlations" (Rockhill, p.6).

Cyril Houle (1961) was one of the first to use qualitative methods, specifically, in-depth interviews, to understand motivation among adult learners. He interviewed 22 people identified as "continuing learners" and found that they could be divided into three groups.

"As I pondered the cases, considering each one as a whole (emphasis added), it gradually became clear that within the group there were in essence three subgroups[...]the goal-oriented, are those who use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives...the activity-oriented... [and]...the learning-oriented, [who] seek knowledge for its own sake" (pp 15-16).

Commenting on his own research thirty years ago, Houle, whose work in adult education has been highly influential, noted:

"The decision to focus the present inquiry on the individual was reinforced by the perplexing fact that no such studies have previously been undertaken...The proper place to begin such an examination would appear to be with the people who are most actively engaged. If we are ever to understand the total phenomenon of continuing education, we must begin by understanding the nature, the beliefs, and the actions of those who take part to the highest degree" (pp 9-10).

Houle's research was not limited to adults who participate basic education, but included those who participate in a broad spectrum of educational activities. Whatever the context, the void he noted then in adult education research, persists today.

In the thirty years since Houle's research, there have been other studies of adult learners and of participation

and persistence, perhaps as Cross asserts: "...thirty variations of the same study." However, few were based on interviews with learners themselves. One exception is Walter Anderson (1990), who has written a book based on interviews with adults who have recently learned to read and their tutors. Anderson provides a brief personal statement about each person he interviewed, learners and tutors. The primary focus, though, is on the reading process: what it is like and what it means to learn how to read, and what it is like and what it means to teach someone how to read. He also includes his own reflections on what reading has meant in his life. Based on his own experience and that of the people he interviewed, the conclusion he reaches is that learning to read is a transformational experience leading to freedom and empowerment.

The existing body of research has contributed to our understanding of the adult learner and the issues to be considered in adult education. In addition, interview research, such as Houle's, has provided a clearer picture of the adult learner and why he or she participates in adult education. A variety of motivational factors, "categories" and "typologies" have been proposed. Despite these insights, we are left, as Rockhill states, with "no

sense of person, let alone the meaning of correlations" of aspects of an individual's life experience.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Philosophical Underpinnings

A research method must be rooted in a philosophy.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) state the issue concisely: "When stripped to their essentials, debates over methodology are debates over assumptions and purposes, over theory and perspective" (p.1). I therefore feel it is necessary to say something about my assumptions, theory and perspective.

I subscribe to the theory in which qualitative research is grounded and the values to which it adheres. Rockhill (1982) and Taylor and Bogdan set forth equally valid justifications for the qualitative perspective in education and I do not wish to duplicate their efforts here. But Taylor and Bogdan do provide a succinct set of values of qualitative research taken as a whole.

1. Qualitative research is inductive.
2. In qualitative methodology the research looks at settings and people holistically; people, settings or groups are not reduced to variables, but are viewed as a whole.
3. Qualitative researchers are sensitive to their effects on the people they study.
4. Qualitative researchers try to understand people from their own frame of reference.
5. The qualitative researcher suspends, or sets aside, his or her own beliefs, perspectives, and predispositions.

6. For the qualitative researcher, all perspectives are valuable.

7. Qualitative methods are humanistic.

8. Qualitative researchers emphasize validity in their research.

9. For the qualitative researcher, all settings and people are worthy of study.

10. Qualitative research is a craft. (pp. 5-8).

Several of the concepts included in the above characteristics have different meanings in different settings. It is, therefore, necessary to clarify my understanding of these concepts in order to support my position as researcher. By inductive, I understand that as researchers we approach an issue no preconceived notions about what we will find. We do not begin with a theory which we then set out to substantiate. Rather, we begin with a question, into which we inquire, wherever it may lead.

That qualitative research is a craft, to me, means that as researchers we have latitude of expression. As it means in the world of the arts, craft is personal and creative. Although probably not "teachable," the idea of a craft does incorporate the notion of apprenticeship. In my case, there certainly was a period of apprenticeship during which the rudiments of a particular approach to qualitative

research were learned. At some point, however, as all artists do, we must make the work our own.

Taylor and Bogdan make an important philosophical distinction between quantitative and qualitative research that I feel is important to note: the positivist versus the phenomenologist.

"The positivist seeks the facts or causes of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals...the positivist searches for causes through methods such as questionnaires, inventories, and demography that produce data amenable to statistical analysis" (pp. 1-2).

"The phenomenologist is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perspective. He or she examines how the world is experienced. The important reality is what people perceive it to be... In contrast to the natural science [positivist] approach, the phenomenologist strives for what Max Weber (1968) called verstehen, understanding on a personal level the motives and beliefs behind people's actions" (Taylor and Bogdan, p.2).

The philosophical orientation of the researcher, therefore, fundamentally influences the subject of research, the method and the outcomes.

My orientation is not only qualitative, but phenomenological. From a phenomenological standpoint, all present (new) experience is in the context of past meaningful experience. "The linkage occurs in the following manner: the later lived experience occurs within a Here and Now whose intrinsic quality is partially determined by the retention of the earlier lived experiences" (Schutz, 1967,

p. 79). It follows then, that in order to understand present experience, it is necessary to understand something of the meaning of past experience.

Rationale

The impetus for this study was, simply, that six learners, aged 29 to 50, were attending consistently and the rest were not. These six people, who attended virtually every day, were unique in our class where the norm was to drop out. In this context, the fundamental question that guided my inquiry was: "What motivates these people to come to the Learning Center and why do these six individuals keep coming?"

The purpose of engaging in this research was to understand the "extraordinariness" of each of the six people. In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to access the life experience, the relationship of factors, past and present, in each person's life that brought her or him to the Learning Center. It was necessary to go beyond surface typologies of participation and adult learners to reveal, at least in part, the complex nature of what motivates each of these learners to come everyday.

Mishler (1990) describes what he calls "life history narratives" which he used in his study of craftspeople. Narrative studies are employed in a variety of fields, most

notably psychology, and can be used to different ends. Mishler differentiates between "deductive" and "inductive" approaches to narrative research. He supports an inductive or "inquiry-guided" approach:

"...my research interviews are relatively unstructured, with respondents controlling the introduction, content, and flow of topics...I ask them to talk about how they came to be doing the work they're doing...Within this frame of a research interview, we have a shared task and purpose: to understand how they came to do and how they view their current work. The personal narrative that emerges is a solution to this task, representing the individual's general solution to the task of making sense of his or her life" (p. 427).

Gitlin (1990) has developed an approach he calls "educative research." He describes this research as:

"...[expand[ing]] the authority to produce knowledge beyond the researcher; attempt[ing] to restructure the researcher-subject relation such that both are involved in identifying and examining beliefs, practices, and normative truths...foster[ing] a political view of knowledge; and attempt[ing] to encourage a more collective approach to research that can mobilize groups typically left out of educational policy discourse" (p. 449).

Research consistent with Mishler's and Gitlin's theories is a complex, often "messy" undertaking. Rather than masking or denying the personal beliefs of those involved in research, Lather (1986) has proposed the need for "openly ideological research." No research is devoid of ideology, no undertaking is neutral or objective. When the ideology, orientation or philosophy of the researcher is

not stated openly, it is still there, between the lines, in every aspect of the study.

I find labels a difficult business. Issues in education and in research rarely fall into neat, discreet classifications. However, I believe the work I have been engaged in with participants would be considered inquiry guided research (Mishler 1990). I began with an interest in and a broad question about what motivated this small group of people to stay at the Learning Center. I was not certain what the outcome would be or what we would discover in the process. The product of inquiry guided research can take many forms. I have chosen to present this research as life histories or personal narratives (Mishler 1990). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) appropriately refer to this type of work as "stories of experience and narrative inquiry." In discussing the value of the narrative, they explain:

"Perhaps because it focuses on human experience, perhaps because it is a fundamental structure of human experience, and perhaps because it has a holistic quality, narrative has an important place..." (p. 2).

I felt that in order to understand the motivation and commitment of the participants it would be necessary to get their "stories," that is, some sense of who they are and what their experiences have been. Although there are other methods, interviewing is an effective means of facilitating

the reconstruction of experience that is necessary to create a life story.

The late Myles Horton once said, "Just having an experience doesn't mean you learned anything from it." But perhaps recreating, retelling the experience, hashing around in one's head leads to learning. I believe as Myles Horton did, that experience, unreflected experience, may be meaningless. True learning, in any context, may only occur through the reconstruction of experience.

I wish to make it clear that this process is not a statistical survey. To be sure, such studies can be significant. However, I do not wish to add to the already burgeoning survey research on motivation and retention in adult education. It is my intent, however, to establish the means through which the participants can help us understand their previous experience, how they view themselves as learners and what motivates them to come to class and to learn.

Participants

[Note: The original project began with six learners but during the interview process one the participants decided to drop out of the project. An explanation what transpired follows]

The participants in the research process were the five adults who consistently attended class despite an

inordinately high attrition rate among other enrollees. The participants were all enrolled in a formal ABE/GED class offered through the county adult education program. The number of participants in the study was limited to five, not by choice but by necessity. Over the seven month period when I was developing the idea for this research, these five people were the only students coming every day. There were other students enrolled in the Learning Center but their attendance was sporadic and the attrition rate was high.

The study began with four women and two men; two Hispanic women, one was Mexican-American, the other Cuban, one White woman, one African-American woman and two African-American men. This is not a survey research study and I do not wish to address issues that are more germane to that type of research such as sampling, validity and reliability. It is, however, sufficient to say that the participants, in age, as well as, ethnic and educational background, were representative of the total population of people who enroll in basic education classes at the Learning Center. The majority tend to be Black, Hispanic and women, a smaller percentage are White and an even smaller percentage are men.

The five participants in this study varied in age from late twenties to mid-fifties. Their previous educational

attainment varied from no formal schooling to the latter years of high school. One participant had already obtained a GED diploma before enrolling in the Learning Center. The initial assessed grade-level performance of the participants ranged from non-reader to upper fifth grade in reading, math and language. Despite surface differences, they shared one essential common characteristic: for whatever reason they came to the Learning Center and they attended virtually every day.

In this case, the five individual lives are not a "sample" from which to generalize to a larger population. The significance of this research will be found rather in the richness and depth of an individual's recounting of personal experience. "In qualitative research, an "N of One" can be just as illuminating as a large sample (and very often more so)" (Taylor and Bogdan, p.81).

Procedures

Contact with Participants

Once the idea for this project was firmly in place and the proposal accepted, I began to discuss participating in this research with each of the five learners. Actual contact was not problematic, since the five people were already known to me and I saw each of them every day. In our initial conversations, I explained the research I

wanted us to do together and why I asked them specifically. None of the participants seemed to really understand "dissertation" or "Ph.D." so I explained what they represented.

Nothing written was exchanged during this first conversation. I gave all five people the concrete details of the research process: the number of times we would meet, the length of each interview and the approximate length of the interview process, and recording and transcribing procedures. I asked each person to think about what I presented and within a day or two to give me their decision. All five people agreed to participate.

I met with each person a second time to review the written consent form and to establish dates and times for the interviews. I read the consent form aloud with each person to be certain they understood all phases of the project and that all interviews were going to be tape-recorded. A copy of the consent form is contained in the Appendix.

I had hoped to set up all of the interviews at the beginning but it quickly became apparent that that would not be possible. It worked with one participant, one of the men, who had few outside demands on his time, and we were able to adhere to the original interview schedule we established.

The rest of the participants' personal lives were much more complex. With one exception, they all had young children for whom they were the primary caregivers; one person also had grandchildren, some had spouses and other family living with them. For those on public assistance, they had to keep several appointments a week with state agencies for food stamps, housing, transportation and medical problems. For these reasons, it was necessary to reschedule many of the interview sessions, often several times.

Interview Structure

The length and number of interviews is always a difficult and somewhat arbitrary decision. It has been suggested that anything more than two hours is too long to sustain active interest and anything less than one hour is too short to pursue issues in-depth. I decided to conduct six one-hour interviews with each of the participants. My decision to set the interviews, at least initially, at one hour, is a result of my reluctance to intimidate or discourage participants with lengthy sessions.

The goal of the interviews was to understand the life experience of the participants and what motivates them to come to the Learning Center. To accomplish this requires a fairly substantial amount of time. I have conducted in-

depth interviews prior to this project. For two years I was the primary interviewer in a research project supported by MESTEP designed to gain understanding of the experience of the beginning teachers enrolled in the program. The method was in-depth phenomenological interviewing and consisted of three ninety-minute interviews with each participant. The primary focus of the interviews was their experience as beginning teachers.

Since the focus of the present study is somewhat wider, I did not feel that three ninety-minute interviews would be sufficient. I also did not want to make the process so long that it would be impossible to sustain active interest on the part of either the participant or myself. I settled on a total of six hours. In the past I found it difficult with some participants to fill ninety minutes. Few of the participants in this project were accustomed to talking about themselves in an in-depth way for any length of time so I decided to shorten the interview time to sixty minutes. Because we would be meeting six times, I felt that there would be ample opportunity to pick where we left off if any of the interviews were cut off because of time.

I used sixty-minute tapes for each interview in order to observe the time limit that participants had agreed to in the consent form. I tried to watch our time and the tape

as much as possible, but at times a story would run past our sixty-minute limit and the tape would run out. In these instances, I made notes of where we were and asked that we pick up the story at the start of the next session.

As I stated, only one of the participants had had experience discussing his personal life in any formal setting. To break the ice and help participants begin reflecting on their own life experience, I asked five of the six people (one of the participants did not yet possess the skills necessary to create a written document) to write an autobiographical statement, a brief chronology of important events in their lives that they felt were marking posts (Bogdan, 1974). I explained that this would be helpful in getting us started and I could refer to it during the interview process if we needed prompting.

The content and length of each chronology varied. I read them all prior to beginning the interviews to get a sense of each person's experience. As it turned out, I did not need to refer to these written documents during the interviews. The participants did not have much difficulty relating their personal stories. A copy of all the chronologies is contained in Appendix B.

Bogdan and Taylor provide the basic guidelines for qualitative interviewing: be nonjudgmental; let the people talk; pay attention; be open to seeing things in a new and

different way; be sensitive; and know when to probe for details. Therefore, I did not have a set of a priori questions to ask each participant. There were three broad areas I wanted to explore with each participant in as much detail as possible: family and childhood experiences, prior educational experiences and experiences as an adult education student in the Learning Center, that is what brought them there and what motivated them to stay.

The interviews were not chronological in the strict sense of the word. We did not begin with the person's childhood and proceed to the present. After reviewing the personal chronologies, I began the first interview with the question: "What brought you to the Learning Center?" I made the decision to open this way because I felt it would be a less intimidating point at which to begin. I hoped this orientation would relieve some of the discomfort and anxiety I felt was present in the past when a participant was asked in the first moments of the interview: "Tell me about yourself from as far back as you can remember." It also allowed us to move backwards and forwards in what I believe is a more natural way.

From that initial question, I tried to follow the lead and logic of the participant, listening and probing when necessary. As I described above, there were general areas I wanted to cover with all participants. However, I tried not

to impose too many of my requirements onto participants' stories. I did not ask exactly the same questions of all participants, nor did I attempt to replicate the interviews. The questions I asked each participant were integrally linked to the recounting of their individual stories.

Since "[d]ata analysis is an ongoing process in qualitative research" (Bogdan and Taylor, p.128), throughout the interviews, I kept notes on emergent insights, thoughts, and ideas. In part, I did this to remind me of events and experiences to return to so that it was not necessary to interrupt participants as they recounted their experiences. I also kept the notes for review when the interview process was complete.

All participants, in signing the consent form, were aware that they were agreeing to a six-hour interview process. As it turned out it was not possible to complete six hours with all participants. I completed all six interviews with two of the five learners. With both participants, the interview process was comfortable and seemed to flow easily. We never ran out of topics for discussion, in fact at times the tape ran out before a story was finished. They seemed to be fairly relaxed and uninhibited talking about their life experiences no matter how painful.

This was not always the case, however. With one participant, after the second interview it was abundantly clear to me that she was not all comfortable talking about her life in an in-depth or deeply personal way. I believed that the participant was honest and straightforward, but we seemed unable to penetrate beyond what I felt was a superficial level of recounting factual occurrences. There were glimmers of the "real" person and "real" feelings in the interviews, but for the most part I felt that her "reality" was inaccessible. I decided that trying to complete four more hours would be a real struggle. We were both having difficulty filling the hour of the second interview. Rather than trying to prolong the process for the sake of the process itself, we decided to conduct a third interview and stop at that. I could see the relief in the participant's face when we reached this decision.

With two of the remaining participants, their personal lives were extremely complicated and filled with outside commitment. In addition, both had medical conditions that resulted in absences and frequent missed appointments. Although the interview process itself was not difficult with either person, I decided not to prolong the time I was spending trying to complete six interviews. We stopped after four interviews because of the time needed to transcribe and work with the material.

Finally, with one participant, it was necessary to abort the entire process in the middle of the first interview. The primary reason for this decision was that the participant was either unable or unwilling to reflect upon her personal experience and discuss it openly on tape. This participant had been previously formally diagnosed as "learning disabled." She was a thirty-three woman incapable of progressing beyond the fourth-grade level in reasoning and comprehension. No matter what the question, her answers were one or two words. In response to questions like: "How old were you when your first child was born?" she would say: "I don't know," or "I don't remember.".

After approximately thirty minutes, I decided to end the interview. The explanation was difficult. I did not want to be dishonest, nor did I want to hurt or embarrass the participant. I expressed my concern about how the interview was proceeding and suggested that perhaps it would be better if we did not pursue the project at that time. Despite my efforts, the participant was obviously hurt and began to cry. After a short time, we were able to pull things together and our "classroom" relationship went on much as it had before this incident. I will return to this issue in a later chapter.

At the completion of the interviews, I was left with five participants rather than the original six. While this

was disappointing from both a personal and professional standpoint, I believe that the decisions I made were justifiable and helped preserve the integrity of the research project as a whole.

Transcription

All interviews were audiotaped and then later transcribed by an outside transcriber. I waited until I was near the completion of all interviews with each participant before sending them to be transcribed. Besides working with the interview material, transcribing the tapes was the most time consuming part of the research project. Because I was doing this work long distance, even more time had to be figured into the project to account for sending and receiving mail.

Finding a competent and affordable transcriber is not easy. In fact, finding the former may be much easier than finding the latter. I relied on two people I knew had done this type of work in the past and whose reputation preceded them. Each sixty-minute tape cost from \$50.00 to \$80.00 to be transcribed. Some transcribers charge a fixed per tape rate and others charge by the printed page. To do it myself would have added considerable time and frustration to the process. I also felt that I needed to have some distance

from the material to regain perspective after completing the interviews. Therefore, the money was well spent.

During the times when I was interviewing different participants concurrently, it was necessary to review my notes and the tape of the previous session before going on with the next to refresh my memory as to where we left off and to aid the flow of discussion.

The transcribers followed certain guidelines fundamental to converting oral tapes to written documents. Everything was transcribed, all speech between the interviewer and participants, all peripheral noises (telephone, doorbell, other people in the background, etc.), all pauses, any obvious or perceived emotion (crying, hesitations, anger, frustration, sadness, etc.) and anything else perceptible to the transcriber.

In addition, the speech of the participants and interviewer is actual. What was said and how it may have been said is represented in the transcription. No corrections or editorial changes are made in the transcribing process to the grammar, colloquialisms, or structure of speech of either participant or interviewer. At the same time, it is necessary to note that no transcript, regardless of the skill of the transcriber, could ever be an exact replication of the interview as it took place. Other than being there, with the possible

exception of a videotape, it is as close a representation of the actual interview as possible.

Working with the Interview Material

Taylor and Bogdan assert that the analysis of qualitative data involves: 1) becoming intimately familiar with the data by reading and rereading the material; 2) looking for emerging themes; and 3) developing concepts and theoretical propositions. I believe it would be unfair to the process and to the participants to confine the analysis any further. Anything more specific regarding the content of the analysis must wait until the work is completed.

Once all interview tapes had been transcribed the next stage of analysis consisted of a very careful reading of all interview transcripts. My purpose in this initial phase was to familiarize myself with each of the transcripts, to acquire an understanding of each participant's story and to get an overall sense of the transcripts as a group. I marked the written transcripts for particular themes that emerged in the reading. Separately, I also kept track of ideas, observations, commonalities, and stark differences in experience among participants that I began to see as I digested each of the transcripts.

There are a multitude of aspects to each of the written transcripts of participant interviews. In the end,

the researcher makes a decision about which aspect(s) will be the focus of the work. Although the purpose of the interviews was to examine motivation and commitment through the personal experience of five adult learners, the initial product (interview transcript) was a jointly created document. I acknowledge the idea that the words of participant and researcher are interdependent; were the researcher or participant different, the product would be different.

Having said that, I have chosen in this study to focus on the words and experience of participants. There is an entire study possible of the interaction of participant and researcher, questions and responses, the methodology of interviewing and so forth. That, however, is not my purpose here. The narratives are, therefore, solely in the words of participants with the only exception being minor changes I made for clarity and understanding.

Preparing the Life History Narratives

There are varied methods of presentation of qualitative research data. In the case of in-depth interviews, however, the media through which data can be preserved and presented is fairly limited. In this research study, I have chosen to present the data in the form of life histories partly because as Klockars (1984) explains,

"Life histories...are a collaborative endeavor. The tone...is that of a partnership rather than a researcher-subject relationship" (in Taylor & Bogdan, p.86).

I felt that this type of presentation is most consistent with my philosophical commitments in conducting research. Since this is study of people's lives and experience, the "truest" and most effective method of communicating the data is, for the most part, through their own words. There is a layer of analysis that must be mine, but I believe that is a subsequent stage of meaning. With participants' words preserved as they are, the experiences are there for others to make meaning.

Editing is required to convert oral interactions into readable written documents. Since the transcripts are verbatim, everything that is audible to the transcriber is included. Therefore, the written documents contain all of the idiosyncracies of informal oral speech such as "um," "ah," "uh," and "mm hmm," as well as repeated words, colloquialisms, messy constructions, faulty grammar and so on.

In addition, the logic and structure of an oral interaction is quite different from that of written material. In a written document, it is usually necessary to make one's point clearly and concisely. In the interviews, the story was the point, with all of the embellishment and

detours that may be along for the ride. I made a concerted effort to ensure that the actual words and stories of participants were not significantly changed. I edited the words of the participants only where clarity and anonymity were compromised.

While I tried to keep the changing of participants' words to a minimum, it was necessary to shorten the interviews substantially. For one participant, if we completed the entire series of six one-hour interviews, the written transcription, double-spaced, could be 160 pages long. With those participants where we did not complete six hours, the transcripts were obviously shorter--100 pages, more or less.

To be sure, each story has merit and value in its own right. However, for inclusion in the dissertation, narratives of great length would be unwieldy and tiresome to read. I decided to edit each of the transcripts to a length that would accurately represent the life experience of the participants as it was related in the interviews, and also sustain the interest of the outside reader. The narratives presented in the next section vary from 15 to 30 pages depending on the length of the original interview.

Condensing the transcripts to the length of the life narratives was accomplished in stages. During the first run-through, I eliminated all of my questions, the oral

speech ("uh" and "mm hmm"), and anything related to the tone and environment inserted by the transcriber, such as [pause], [crying], [phone] and the like. All of these pieces of the transcripts are important, but some of them are part of a different kind of analysis and presentation of material.

In the next stage, after a close reading, I edited for readability, ensuring that the sentences were coherent and the logic of the story could be followed. Again, the rule was not to change the participants' words, to the extent possible. I also began to edit out some phrases that I felt obstructed the content of the written document, such as "like," as in "She like said to me....," "you know," and "and stuff." I did leave some of these phrases in when they were integral to the sense of the sentence. In some instances it was necessary to change some of the words of the participants for purposes of clarity and flow. When I did this, my words appear in brackets. Occasionally, I omitted several words or parts of sentences as they appeared in the transcription. Again, this was done in the interest of clarity and ellipses (...) were substituted. No ellipses appears if the only one word was omitted because it was extraneous or redundant.

The final stage of the process I felt was the most ruthless. Often after the second editing, the narratives

were still 50 pages long. In this last editing, I omitted parts of the narratives that were not absolutely essential to the telling of the participants' stories. There were instances where sections of a narrative were somewhat distracting to the overall story; these were cut only as a last resort to shorten the narratives for inclusion here. I also omitted sections that, while describing salient events in participants' lives, may have compromised the integrity, respect or anonymity of the individual.

The final act in creating the narratives was to give each of the participants a pseudonym. While it would seem a simple enough act on the surface, it actually took some time. Deciding upon a pseudonym, was not only a matter of picking a fake name for each participant. I wanted to pick a name that would approximate the "essence" of each person as I have come to know him or her and that would be consistent with the ethnic backgrounds. Simply put, I had to be able to say, "Yes, I could see this person with that name."

CHAPTER 4

LIFE NARRATIVES OF FIVE ADULT LEARNERS

In this chapter, I present the encapsulated stories of the five adult learners who are the focus of this study of motivation and commitment in our adult basic education classes. I have previously stated that in the context of our classes, where the attrition and non-attendance rates were high, the five people who attended every day were extraordinary. Every person's life is special in some way and each person's experience is unique and deserving of respect. Nevertheless, I still believe the narratives that follow illustrate just how extraordinary the five learners in this study are.

I have added a brief introduction to each narrative to situate the person in time and place. In addition, a postscript appears at the end of each person's story. In some cases, the interviews were completed several months ago and I wanted to give a sense of where the participants are in their lives at this time. The narratives are the words of the participants. The postscripts are in my words.

The interviews are not easily carved up into neat sections. Life experience is difficult to relegate to discreet categorizations. However, I felt that taken as a whole, the interviews as narratives could be divided into two sections: 1) the events that brought people to the

Learning Center (although it is arguable that everything that came before in their lives brought them to the Learning Center); and 2) everything else they discussed about their lives. Therefore, I included the question I asked everyone as we began the interviews: "What brought you to the Learning Center." For the second section, "Scenes from a life" was the only phrase that came to mind to describe the rest of what participants shared during the interview process.

I did not rearrange any portion of the interviews to craft the narratives. The sequence of events in each narrative follows the sequence in the original transcript. In several places in the narratives, I have interrupted the text with asterisks. I only did so when the time or subject in the text that follows is not at all related to what immediately precedes it.

Louis Johnson

Louis is a 34-year-old Black male originally from Washington, DC. He moved to Key West with his wife who is pursuing a career in the Navy. He came to the Learning Center after he was referred to us from another agency. At first, he was not a "formal" student. He was only coming part-time at the suggestion of his counselor basically to fill his time while he looked for a job. He was the only student from the beginning of June until the first week in July, 1990; we have no classes during that month and we were gearing up and reorganizing for our new program. Louis participated in the On-the-Job-Training Program.

"What brought you to the Learning Center?"

I had been workin'. I hadn't worked much in the last several years, and I finally started workin' steady in the last year. I worked more in the last year than I have in the last 10 years of being married. I had a lot of foot trouble. In '85 I had foot surgery. The joint that was supposedly repaired, I have a lack of mobility in it, so the problem really wasn't corrected. I had a lot of problems standing and kneeling and bending and those type of things.

[I worked at] the supermarket on the night. The hours were really long. I did on the average 12 hours a day, five days a week. I'd go in at 9:00 at night and get out by 12:00 the next day, and it was just too much. I had a lot of problems with my feet swelling.

I worked there approximately three weeks to a month. Prior to there I had worked at the Navy Exchange for about 6 months, cashier, sales supervisor. It was an okay job. I just had problems with their policies or the lack of policies being enforced. So it was more of a personality conflict with my immediate supervisor and what management did to resolve the conflicts. I wasn't getting the feeling of that much growth or learning experience there. I was never a cashier before. I went from cashier to sales supervisor I think in three months. And also they wanted you to be responsible but in certain areas "supervisor" was just a title. You didn't have any real power you know. I didn't care too much for that.

I went to the vocational rehab [program]. I had worked with them two and a half years ago in Jacksonville. It involves, you speak to a counselor and you set goals. Well actually I didn't know anything about Vocational Rehab, in fact I didn't even know they existed or what type of services they had. And I went into a drug rehabilitation program three years ago, which was '87.

I had just moved to Jacksonville. My wife's in the Navy and I had just moved the first of October, and I was really bummed out. I came across a friend and we got to talkin. I mentioned to him about using drugs and things and he said he knew some places where we could score some drugs. I was kinda this is somethin I want to get into anymore. So after that I found out that the Navy had a drug/alcohol testing center on the base and I went and I took the test. Depending on how you looked at it I would pass with flying colors or I flunked. Out of a 100 questions I got 99 of 'em right So it was a determination as to whether you were an addict or alcoholic.

So I went into a private drug treatment center. The Navy, their program is basically for military personnel, so their bed space and things is limited. So they referred me to a private drug treatment center. I went there and during the course of the treatment the Vocational Rehab counselor came in and talked with me to see if I was a candidate for their program after I got out of drug treatment. And they sent me to a psychiatrist and he did an examination to find out where I was. Since I had the feet problem he sent me to a bone specialist.

They picked up the tab, at least for the initial examinations. The psychiatrist that they sent me to stated that he thought that I should still have psychiatric counseling after I got out of treatment. And my contract with Vocational Rehab, one thing I was to do was to keep going to counseling, and that was out no cost to Vocational Rehab. They wanted to put me into a weight program way across town at the University Hospital, also at no cost to them, and I would have to provide transportation. I believe the program was some type of experimental program or something like that.

I resisted doing that half of the program. One is the time and two is if I'm gonna lose weight or exercise

is somethin I'd rather do on my own. So eventually what I did is I just got up and started going to the gym three times a week, spendin about three hours there. And I began to lose weight and I was still goin to the therapist twice a week. On occasion I even went three times a week. The medical coverage, the insurance coverage was only for twice a week, so any additional visits were straight out of the pocket expenses.

Well, my wife bein in the military was transferred here in July of '89, and I moved down here in November of '89. I was still in Jacksonville; I moved down in November. Working at the Navy Exchange and being disappointed in that. Not being able to work at [the supermarket], going through Vocational Rehab again, and findin the terms that they wanted me to adhere to in their program I didn't want to do. They referred me to come in here.

Before my case was really even put in say the paperwork, they wanted me to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings I believe either twice a week or three times a week, and go to a weight doctor and lose weight. I know that they wanted me to be tested to go to a psychiatrist again and be evaluated. I had committed myself to 18 months of psychotherapy and I had lost weight and things of this nature. I felt that I had shown more of a commitment than they had given me.

I also resented bein told that I had to go to Alcoholics Anonymous. I had attended meetings like that; I am of the opinion that this is sort of a brainwashing operation, maybe not intentionally but it doesn't allow the person to really think for themselves, to really examine his or her own life and say some of the effects or causes in my life is not due to me screwin' up, but is due to other people screwin' up. So that and it has an undertone of religion to it, the type of things that sort of got the hair up on my neck. I was annoyed that I would have to participate in a program outside of a program that I wanted, and I think I'm entitled to be in.

So I came to the Learning Center. I presented my case wanting to at least get a better education and not just run out and get a job but at least get a job that I felt was more challenging to my character and things of that nature, something to make me a better person, not just another worker but a better person.

Wanting to improve myself, wanting to improve my condition is something that has been with me a long time, since I was a kid. It's, an inner flame, the world can be better than this. What I'm seein around me can be better than this, and I don't just mean having things cars an tv's and stuff like that. That played a big part, but it's wanting to have something more. One is just have inner peace, some peace and quiet, some feeling of accomplishment.

For the first time in my life I'm gettin close to it and it feels scary. It feels all of those things that I longed for, lookin for this peace since at least '62, '63. And it seems it's on the horizon, and by that I mean it seems it might be accomplished in the next ten years. I'm kinda thinkin about that now, and it's real scary.

Now since I've been here in the Learning Center and I've always been quoted as bright or intelligent. At the same time I resented other people trying to use my brightness or intelligentness for what they thought it should be used for. And for the first time I'm gettin in touch with that brightness or intelligentness and usin it in a way I feel comfortable with, in a way that I want, goin in a direction that I want to go in.

Scenes from a life.

My first thought was my fifth grade teacher. I was in a conference with her and I was livin with my aunt; my aunt adopted me when I was about 8 or so. I remember we was in a conference one day and the teacher remarked that I was a very bright student and that I was different from the other students and if they could just stop me from being a bully, that I would be okay. [That was] one of the first times I resented or I thought "you're tryin to direct my intelligence to a place that I don't wanna go to."

The other time, I remember walkin with my aunt and I guess it was back when a Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea was on. I remember walkin down the street on a Sunday night and I was tellin her all about the sub, the Seaview sub and the little flyin saucer and how it comes out and what it could do. And it was great, it was real neat! And she just said to me as straightforward and coldly: "That would be great if you would use that

intelligence in school." And I just felt this was somethin great and wonderful that I wanted to talk about, that was of an interest to me, and it's tellin me to apply it to somethin else that was of no interest to me.

Conduct-wise up until about half way through the fourth grade I was very quiet and reserved. Grade-wise I would fluctuate between Bs, and Cs. Occasionally I would get an A+ or something that, but most times it seems to me that I recall a lot of the teachers would give me lower grades because they thought that I was capable of doin better work. So I was doin the work the class was gettin Bs in, but I would get a C because they felt that I should be able to have got at least an A- or A.

The most I've ever done was beat a couple of people up in a fist fight. That was about the degree I went. But those were the kind of things people did, throw lye on somebody. I had a aunt once, her husband used to beat her up all the time, and her husband was a big guy. You talk about black guys being big. He was maybe 6'5, 280 lbs. and she was small, 5'2, 110 lbs. I don't know if other races do it but black people, I know the black people in my section that I grew up with, particularly the women, if you would beat 'em up or somethin like that, they would always say "But you have to sleep some time."

But anyway he used to beat her up and one night she took some, Crisco and she heated it up and she threw it on him. But to make it worse she put sugar in it so it would stick, and she threw it on him and you could see it had took all his skin on the right side of his body, where his forearm was and down his chest and stuff that. After that I didn't hear him beatin her up anymore.

Sometimes the way I see the profoundness or the effect on me. Although I didn't participate in the violence, the way I see it reflected in me as a person is I watch the news. last night someone went in a hotel or a bar and held the people hostage and shot someone. And when they say these things have happened, in our community and I'm so? One person goes in and kills one person it's on nation-wide tv and what's the problem? So what? I'm yeah, but you only lost one person. What's the problem? It's hard for me to feel anything.

I feel that I have a lack of conscience. It happened to me and it's happened to people that I've known for years. I mean just now we're gettin the type of coverage in the media, 60 Minutes or 48 Hours, special reports showin what's going on in the inner cities. And I resent that because it's only because it's affecting mainstream America more, and I feel that's why it's bein done. So I kinda go back and forth. I should really feel sorry, to who gives a fuck, you know. Somebody else is dead, you know.

Also the Vietnam veterans, they brought something back to the community also. I lived in a house with some ex-veterans, one in particular. They brought back a different perspective about life, about people, about pain and sufferin. And the time that I spent with this one particular guy, the liquor, the drugs. He was late 20s or 30s; he was a young man. But he was old. I mean his teeth had been rotted out from the sugar and everything. He would have these real bad shakes and things. He would talk about seeing things that wasn't there. He would talk about ambushes, lightin up cigarettes at night and bein zapped and stuff that. I was hearin all this and I was trying to visualize, what it looked or what it felt and how it was. And I think I was affected by that too. And it's everyone had a story.

I lived at my foster mother's house, the lady that was takin care of me since I was 2 weeks old. I met some people comin in and out of there. And my foster dad was a friend of my foster mother. They was just friends. And his son would tell me things. And the street. You could be just walkin down the street and someone could just stop you in the street and they would just start talking, a wino or somethin that. They would just talk and say things you know. Or my foster mother at night, when she would talk to some of the older kids who were in their teenage years and she would talk about someone being raped or someone being shot or someone havin lye thrown on 'em. I would lay there and listen to these different stories.

So throughout the years I would receive all of this information and then sometimes even settin in school, I would think about all of this stuff that I'd just heard the night before. Friday nights were particularly bad, Friday and Saturday nights because you know you was gonna hear more gun fire, you was gonna hear more police

cars or more ambulances. It's Friday and Saturday nights, particularly Saturday night, I just wanted to take a bath and watch the Jackie Gleason show or somethin like that, just stay away. I used to stay away from a lot of people, things like that, and try to watch tv as much as possible.

[My foster mother] had some foster kids like me. one kid, his mother just left him. Then she had her grandchildren, three of 'em. Then she had my cousin and she had some kids she was takin care of. So we're talkin maybe close to ten kids in the house at any given time, and we're talkin about a 2 bedroom house. At one point we had a real big house. It was 2 bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a hallway. And my foster dad, I would stay over there a lot, so I kinda got out of it at times. I kinda called him that, [but he wasn't], not legally. In terms of understanding the relationship... That's the role that they took. They both died. He died in about 1968, 67 somewhere along in there. And the female died in March of '75 or '76. One died of cancer and the other one just died of old age.

So it was kinda crazy because I lived there but then my legal aunt would come and I would go visit with her sometimes, and she would take me over to see my mother which lived in Baltimore. I would just go from one place to another place. And then in the course of the time I was growin up, my foster mother moved maybe six or seven times, somethin like that. So they was a lot of movin about. Different neighborhoods meant different types of behavior, familiarities and things like that.

One of my aunts had told me mother had found out that this lady did this, and she brought me over after two weeks of birth. I believe the arrangements was she was to pay once a week or once every two weeks, something like that. And from what I know she made payments the first couple of months and then stopped making payments after that. She had a sister, my aunt living in DC also. My aunt would from time to time either make payments or bring some type of clothing or food not on a semiregular basis. So she sort of took up where my mother left off. [My aunt] would take me to visit [my mother] and I didn't know what to even call her. I knew she was my biological mother, but I didn't know what to call her or anything.

My aunt, after I got a certain age - five or six or so - would take me a couple of nights a week. I was kind of confused. In the first grade they asked who are your parents? And I remember I didn't know what to put on the paper. And then they would say "Well, who takes care of you?" and I would put Miss Bird. Then my aunt found out. She would keep in touch with the people at school and she found out and she got on my case for putting Miss Bird because she was saying she was taking care of me. Legal guardian and things. And then it would say "your mother's name" and I knew my mother name, so I didn't know what to put. So it was really, when it came to filling out documents and forms and stuff.

Miss Bird had a friend which was Mr. Lloyd and he sort of would take me to work with him or give me money or buy things and stuff like that, but they didn't live in the same house. In some of the cases he would live in the upstairs apartment and some of the cases he would live next door. [Miss Bird was] just somebody in the neighborhood that took care of kids.

It felt kind of lonely and distant. It's kind of contradictory because sometime I played with other kids, but for the most part I didn't know how to interact with them. I look at it even today here in the class. I notice with the more students in the class there are, the less I want to interact. I'm not very good at interacting. Plus I would be teased a lot because I was fat. So I would be made fun of, things like that.

It's real strange. I never knew what [Miss Bird] thought about me. I mean she taught me all the rules of society, you don't steal, you respect your elders, you speak to people, you always keep groomed, if you had raggedy underwear they better be clean when you leave the house. She was real insistent that I obey and stay within the rules. She never really talked to me; she would say a sentence or two to me, "You know better than that" but it was hard for me to relate to her. I would play with her and she would get mad and throw something at me. At times I seemed closer to her than most of the other, male kids, and at the same time it seemed she was the hardest on me.

But she used to beat me when I was, maybe four or five. I mean we moved to this one house and it just seemed I couldn't do anything right, I could never do anything to please her. So after that I would mostly

just listen to her or just stay to myself. But I never knew how she felt until she was dying. She died when I was about 17, but before that she would say "You belong with your mother" or my aunt wasn't my real mother and that my aunt had said things to hurt her feelings.

She would say things like the church isn't honest or they're not telling the truth. I'm just discovering now where a lot of my moral fabrics came from or a lot of my values came from. She had a real strict code of ethics or values, and at the same time she was very independent. She didn't want the system to help her, nor did she want her kids or anybody to help her and attach a condition to it. It's if you're going to help me, help me. If you attach a condition to it I don't want your help.

At different points she received welfare, and I think a housing subsidy, and the income from taking care of the kids was sporadic. Sometimes they were just my mom. Sometimes they paid, sometimes they didn't, that type of thing. She did have a daughter that was a nurse and I believe she would give her a couple of dollars but she would do laundry for people and that was a subsidy. I think Alan and her daughter-in-law were pretty consistent in paying, 'cause Alan worked. He was a roofer.

Food was like today we'd have pork and beans and hot dogs, for lunch we'd have maybe a bologna or peanut butter sandwich with jelly. So food was always the minimal. There was a lot of it. You can go pretty far with a can of pork and beans and hotdogs. So it was nothing really spectacular except on Sundays it would be chicken, and some greens. Then [we'd] buy bread at the bread store where you could get five loaves for 75 cents or a dollar. Only problem is if you had moldy bread you'd just cut the end off that was moldy.

[L]egally and technically I think about age 8 I stopped living [with Miss Bird] pretty much. I started living with my aunt. I remember the night when I left the house where Miss Bird was [she was] saying she didn't know what she was going to do and there were all these mouths to feed, and I left the house. I walked around. I think I was about 7 or 8 and I just walked around the streets for a couple of hours, and then I decided to go and make a pitch to my aunt. "If you let me live with you I'll be good," that type of thing. So I

asked to live with her only out of necessity because I didn't want to be a burden [to Miss Bird.] She would say "I've have it with this person when they don't pick up their kids" or whatever. I kind of felt that's how she felt about me, except she would just say other kids.

I had that feeling that she would discuss things with me. It was just too much. It was a overload. I didn't know how she really felt during those times. Then when I turned about 11 or 12, I wanted to come back; I felt I was old enough to work. But she wouldn't let me come back, and I felt kinda hurt about that.

But when she got sick I was about 17. I went to visit her one Saturday morning. I went to where she was living, and one of the neighbors said "If you're looking for that lady she's in the hospital." So I went. It was sort of a city hospital. [A]ll the time I was growing up, most people, if they went to Freedman's hospital, they usually didn't come out. So I went there and she was asleep so I left. I came back later that afternoon. Her daughter-in-law said she was crying because she wanted to see me. It was not until that point after being around her for 17 years that it was important for her to see me before she died. And that kind of struck me. I never knew that I was important to her. All I knew was she wanted me to stay out of trouble.

I never liked touching or say things. I went in and I held her hand. Her hair was kinda loose, and she would always have it really tight together, and she had on a hospital gown. She had a tube up her nose, I think one down her throat. She didn't want the other kids to see her. It was okay for me and a few of my cousins. I stayed and again we never talked.

She was conscious the whole time. I spent almost 24 hours there and I went home. I got in trouble with my job because I didn't call and I didn't show up. I spent pretty much that week with her, and every now and then I'd put lotion on her hands, her skin was drying up really bad. And at one point she went to take the tube out and I [said] "No. You know better than that!" and she just cried.

It ended up being about a week that I would just sit there with her. And that was hard because I never liked hospitals, never liked the smell of them. And that following Saturday I spent the afternoon with her. It

was going into the night and she knew and I knew, that she wouldn't be there the next time. I stayed with her as long as I could, and I told her I was going home and get some sleep and I'd be back tomorrow. I just didn't want to be there when she died. I didn't want to see her die.

It was real strange, because when I left I stopped and turned around and looked at her. You just know. And then my cousin called about 2:00 that morning and said that she was dead, which I knew. I walked back to the hospital. My cousin was there and kissed her on the forehead. And my cousin said "Aren't you gonna kiss her too?" and it was something I really didn't want to do, but it was something that I couldn't not do.

So I kissed her on the forehead and out of all the years I've known her, I've only kissed her I think twice. One time when she moved to the last place before she went to the hospital, I was talking to her one night, or just listening and she was sitting in the chair when I was getting ready to leave. It's the first time I got up enough nerve to kiss her, and I kissed her on the cheek. And when I was in the first grade I had a real bad day at school, I came home and I was gonna ask her could I kiss her on the cheek and [have] a hug? She said "No." After that, I just never did it.

Miss Bird was older and I used to wish I had a younger mom. I wished I had a mom that was only 20 years or 30 years older than me, one that was prettier. When my foster parent would take me to the Warner building and I would watch 'em and listen to 'em and pick who would I want for a mom. So that game I been playing for a long time. I used to go to clinic a lot. I used to always have ear infections. I used to go there and pick the nurses out, the way they looked, the way they talked. But that was when I was 9 or 10, I used to see the pregnant mothers, that used to scare me. But at the Warner Building, I used to pick out what I thought might be a mother that I might like. But never a father. It was always just a mother.

Mr. Lloyd, I don't know how his relationship got to be with Miss Bird, but she would kinda take care of him, he would get drunk and she would put him to bed or make sure his money was put up so he wouldn't lose his money. She would kind of look after him, and he took a liking to me and my cousin. So he would buy stuff for us in

particular. He had grown sons. Sometimes I would stay over his house. But there was no feelings in the relationship. It was just he liked me and he bought stuff for me and he bought stuff for my cousin but there wasn't any bond or anything there.

[M]y aunt and them would tell me later when I was in my teenage years, "This person thinks you're important to them." People would tell me later, but as far as how I actually felt, no. I could be in a room and people not even notice I was there you know, literally almost walk over me. I never felt that what I did and what happened to me was really important to anyone or that it mattered.

I guess the closest person I tried to be with is this girl that lived next door when we were on New Jersey Avenue. I had a job with my uncle's tourist home. Actually it was a bordello except, the prostitutes were 15, 16. I worked there when I was 10; my aunt got me that job. I got a dollar day. But the person I was closest to was this girl next door, and she was a little bit older than me. I had sexual relationship with that girl. And she knew about sex. I asked her one day could we have sex together and so we did. But then I kinda got hooked on the feeling of being with someone. This was the closest person I've ever been to, and I thought it would take away that void or that empty feeling inside.

I really thought if I was close to somebody that it would fix it, and it was terrible. I wanted to be with this person more and more. It became an obsession, and then she became very manipulative. And then I was "I'm not gonna participate in this anymore" and she threatened to tell Miss Bird, and me being "good kid," I had a reputation to try to protect. And so, that just went on the whole summer and it was real hard.

I moved that September and that's how I got out of it. But then a couple of years later, my female cousin did the same thing. [W]e was in the house together by ourself one day, and she was undressed in front of the mirror. It's just "Do you want to have sex with me?" And it didn't seem right, but at the same time I'm not sure. So I tried and I just couldn't.

The worst time I had with relationships, with women, was I was visiting my sister. I have a half sister. She's five years younger than me. We went over

one day, I musta been, 13 at the time, and there was this girl that was my sister friend. And my sister told me that she liked me. So it was me and the girl and we started kissing. And then my sister said "I want you to kiss me too" and I'm "Nah, I don't think so." But I did it. I kissed her on the cheek. [And she said] "I want you to kiss me the way you was kissing her." And I did it. And then that weekend we kinda played with each other, and then I didn't want to go back there anymore. And it's the same thing, she threatened, "Either you do this or I'm gonna tell my mother and I'm gonna tell the girl father that lives upstairs."

And those three incidences kinda ran in succession, different years but I just backed away from that. Pretty close to a year when I worked at the tourist home seeing people having sex that, it was just something degrading about the whole experience, about those relationships. There was something very manipulative about them. I felt they left me even less whole than before. Each incident, each time I lost a little bit more of myself.

I felt [victimized] for a lot of years. [T]hey [used to] say once a boy is with a girl, especially if he's older that she becomes addicted to him and I felt just the opposite. I felt that I was more or less being manipulated or the victim in these circumstances. And one of the things I hated about Miss Bird was, whenever I would go to stand up for myself, to say "I'm not taking this, I'm not doing this bullshit," that wasn't accepted. In her house boys standing up being boys was not accepted.

Well, the one thing that stopped me from running away was the streets was worse. I heard you can get raped, you can get killed. [Y]ou don't have any place to stay. [In] the house you knew how to survive. I learned how to adapt to survive, hiding or staying out of the way or disappearing. But in the street I had no idea what to do, where to go to survive, not to be killed. I was more afraid that I would have to figure some way to survive, and I didn't know if I was smart enough to do that. That was my main fear that maybe [my aunt] would say no and I would have to find a place to live, some way to survive, some way to not be molested or killed.

[It was] kind of a negotiation [with my aunt.] "I'll let you be my mom 'cause that's what you really want." She couldn't have her own kids. She was

[infertile]. So I had to be her kid and say "mom." She adopted me when I was 8 or 10. I have her last name. [I lived with her] till I turned 21, and then I left. I left when I was in the CETA program. I left and the job placement and didn't work out so I came back home in March and then I left that summer and I went to school. So I stayed there till I was 21. But actually I should have left when I was 17.

I stopped going over [to see my biological mother] at roughly age 15 or 16. I think she came over and I stayed out of the house. So if I remember correctly the last time I seen her was in about 1978. I never knew what to say to her, what to talk about. I got up enough courage to ask her if I could come live with her. She never answered me. She just never said anything.

But later that weekend, my aunt asked me had I asked my mother to live with her. I was shocked because I took the conversation to be a private conversation, she hadn't given me a verbal response or any indication of yes, no, whatever. [M]y aunt said "What did she say?" and I didn't say anything. I didn't respond to the question. And then all of a sudden my aunt got mad and said that she wouldn't have me living with her.

My relationship with my aunt could go from warm to distant. I'm not sure if this was at the same time or earlier. My aunt from my father's side was [over] and I asked to meet my father, but my aunt reminded me that I was a trouble maker, wanting to see my father, and my father had deserted my mother and he wasn't any good, and I was just like him. So that was about the last time I seen her. I didn't want any contact with her or that situation.

I was on the verge of leaving school; school started up again I was less inclined to go. The other thing was amount of violence in the school; there was a lot of robberies and things. So the atmosphere was beginning to be more negative. I think about the last thing that happened to me that tipped the scales was I used to take pictures and took my camera to school and I was setting out on the driveway outside of the school. One of the guys that was in my class in junior high school, his cousin was there with some other guy and he picked up my camera and he gave it this guy that he was with and said "I'm giving this to you." I was sitting there and I looked at a friend and I'm like "what the

fuck is this?" And I go after the guy and he pulls out a .38, and he said "If you want it, come and get it." So I decided this wasn't the time to go after him.

And all of this time has been a real struggle to stay out of trouble. I mean from as far back as I can remember the option is you can go to jail, get killed or just stay out of trouble. I tried to stay out of trouble, at least that kind of trouble, as much as I could. So between that and Miss Bird dying, I didn't see any real permanence in things. [A]bout the same time I went to a counselor and the counselor is telling me "You know, you're short these credits and if you want to graduate you'll have to go to night school." It just wasn't worth it to me. So I left. I dropped out of school then. I believe it was March of the eleventh grade.

[I had no plan for myself.] None. I mean at the same time I got a job through the school. It was a [work study] job, you work for this company, you graduate high school and the company keep you. They was with the Veteran's Administration. The director, was a white guy and the assistant director was a black guy. It was in the data processing center also. The assistant director took a lot of interest in me; sort of took me under his wing and said "You get out of school, you come and work here. "If you want to go to data processing or programming I'll set you up to do that." So he took an interest in me.

[W]hen I left school I axed the program at the same time, and I just didn't feel this was where I wanted to be. I didn't want to be in school and I didn't want to be with these people in this office politics, because to me it was just bullshit anyway. I did drugs a little bit more. I occasionally smoked pot, that increased a little bit. I still worked at the church on weekends. I had been working there since I was about 10, cutting the grass, pulling weeds. I got real good at stripping and waxing floors. I was real good at rug shampooing. I had a few dollars. But for the most part I would smoke a little bit more and go out on the weekends, on Saturday nights, to movies. I always pretty much stayed by myself.

I really was kinda down on life, and I was like if trouble comes I'll deal with it as necessary. I got kinda hostile again. I was real angry, especially

towards white people. [When] I would go [downtown], I would see people who would wear Izod shirts, and they would be out with their woman walking around and the shops were expensive. I was kinda like "what did I do to deserve this fucked up life?" and they're "Oh, Saturday night. Let's go out and eat." So I was real hostile and resentful towards middle-aged, yuppie white people.

I think pretty close to a year, and one day I was in bed and I was home mosta the time during the day. One day I says, I woke up and realized that I'd been drunk for a year, kinda in a slump. I woke up and realized that the very thing that I been fighting against my whole life, even telling some of my friends if you really want to make it you can make it.

Anyway I just woke up one day and I realized I was in that slump, only for whatever reason I hadn't killed anybody. I just said I need to go and find something, do something. And that's when I got into the other program to get my GED for me. And it wasn't because I thought I could get a better job because people that did graduate, they didn't seem to be that much better off. But it was just something I needed to do for me. And I don't know how I found out about the program, but I found out about it and I went and I got my GED in '77...I was ready to go to school.

I used to take pictures in the program [and] everyone kept saying "You take great pictures." So they hooked me up with this company, an internship type thing, but they wasn't able to hire me after the program. So during the program I left home. I got the subsidy that they gave us, I got a room a little past the red light district. I stayed there and I studied and I got disappointed again when they said "Well, you can work for us but you won't be able to stay here," My room was \$30 and then I had to buy a bus pass and everything. So I was basically living off \$20 a week. I'd go down to the corner store and get beans or hot dogs or something. It was this one girl in there and I would ask for a hot dog but she would give me a half smoked and put chili on it. So that was something positive. But I was trying to make it outta the situation I was in.

After that didn't work out I went back home in March. I had been in the program a year. I went back home to my aunt's, and I was there until June. I started to go back to that same place that I was before I got

into the program. I started to smoke some more and all of that. [It was] kinda overwhelming. It's like all of this has been for nought, the educational thing, the stay out of trouble, this belief system that you can make it if you really want to. All of this has been a joke; you've been bullshitting yourself with this line that you've been feeding yourself. It was really depressing. So I started sleeping again, I started smoking again, I started drinking not to think, not to feel, not to be conscious of any of this stuff.

The most out of control I felt in my life with drugs was when I almost OD'd on cocaine a few months earlier. And then for that last week after that incident where I almost had a heart attack, I smoked the most marijuana that I've ever smoked. I was smoking two or three joints a day. I'd wake up and smoke, I'd smoke some in the afternoon. I went with a guy that was in the program with me and got a whole ounce. I smoked every day almost as breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So that was the most out of control. But later back home it was just a joint in the morning and one in the evening, that to me wasn't excessive or out of control. I still could function. I just couldn't concentrate, I had no motivation. But I personally didn't consider that out of control.

Well, back at home again I decided to pursue the photography thing. I started researching schools. I found that the closest school was in Pittsburgh. I called there and they said you needed a portfolio. So I started putting these pictures together and I wanted to present 'em up there and get accepted to this school. I went up there and talked to the guy and said "Look, I don't have any money" I wasn't good enough for a scholarship but he said "You can get a student loan. We'll fill out the paperwork and all of that. All you have to do is show up and sign the check, and you can get through school pretty much."

This was a trade school. "Just sign and get student loans and just sign" and I think tuition was \$800 a quarter and dorm fee was \$500 and you still have some left over to do work, and things like that. But they didn't tell me I couldn't get any more but that one for every two quarters. [S]o I'm up there and I get through the summer quarter and I get through the winter quarter, and the counselor calls me and says "You need to come up with \$800 to come back in January." I called my aunt and

she turns in the savings bond that she had on me and she sent them to the school, and they was still \$300 short.

I had come out of a slump and I'm working three jobs. I'm working in the mail room in school. I'm working cleaning up the dorm at the school, and I'm also working in the kitchen. I worked these three jobs and the guys in the dorm are getting high and everything. There's plenty of dope around. Occasionally on a Friday night I would maybe have a drink with some of the guys, but I had really stopped drinking and smoking. I would have some Thunderbird or we'd mix grain alcohol with some punch, but I kept it in check. And they called me to the office in January 'cause I said "If we can't work something out I might as well go back home now." And he said "We can work something out."

Come January they said "You owe \$300." I lost my job in the mailroom. They gave it to a African. They said he needs it more than you. The other thing was if you don't finish your program you're gonna lose your jobs and you can't work. So at that point they expelled me, not academically. In fact I think my grades had picked up in a lot of my courses. But [they] told me I can't continue classes until I pay this balance. In the years to come I've found out that it was a racket, that a lot of students ended up the same place I did. They never finished, and the ones that did finish, maybe out of every 10 people two of 'em got a job in that field.

And even now since I work sporadically, I owe \$1,300 interest, and I'm just now beginning to pay off a \$2,500 loan that I got in 1977. I owe \$3,700 which makes me ineligible for any legitimate loans or grants. So I was really pissed off for quite a while. I got a chance to get out of here, because DC was gettin worse. It was bad when I was growin up but it was gettin worse. It was really goin down hill. So when I got there I realized that I was just pissin into the wind. But at least I got somewhere different, and I just told him. I said "I have no way of coming to this school." I had borrowed money to catch the bus to go to Pittsburgh. I really realized that I was in a pipe dream.

I had seen guys, primarily in elementary school, with a lot of talent, not just physical talents. But none of the teachers ever really encouraged us to be anything other than sport people. They never really encouraged us to be a writer or a scientist or run for

political office or do anything out of the norm. In fact, in the 5th and 6th grade they put us in this sports orientated program, but the first thing the counselor said to us when we met him, was "You niggers are going to jail with your bad attitude." He had been from the streets and I think he had played some professional ball. [He was a] light skinned black. This is the first thing, outta his mouth [a]nd I resented that.

I mean people would come to the church and say "They're bad, they're this, they're that" but no one ever came in and says "This is a bad neighborhood. People are not eating. People, [a]re on welfare, they've been on welfare, their mother was on welfare, their daughter is on welfare. No one looked at that system. They didn't look at the fathers were never around. I mean none of those things were taken in account. It's just we're a bunch of bad niggers running the street terrorizing people, and it really hurt because no one really gave any positiveness.

I wanted to be either a fireman or a policeman. In fact just before I dropped out of school, one of the things I did was I went and took the test, and I missed it by maybe 8 points...it was sorta like I'll do something else. I don't know what. Police was about the only thing, but I did want to be something else other than a football player.

They say participate in programs and stay out of trouble, and that was my experience with the Boys Club. The counselors are "He'd stay out of trouble if he'd just come to the club and shoot some hoops" but who's there with you? The same guy that beat me up back in the 5th grade. He's there and we just have a "official" but it's still the same old shit. [The setting is different], the players are the same. And later these same players are the same ones that are in jail. These same guys that you're running with is the same guys that went out and blew somebody's brains out over five or ten bucks. These same guys are the ones doing hard time strung out on heroin.

Some of the girls that I grew up with, when they was 11 or 12, by that time they had been raped. I was almost raped between the ages of 11 and 13. I was living with my aunt, but he lived down the street from where Miss Bird lived. So one afternoon, [he said] "You know

what girls and boys do?" and "Well, let's do that." And he's pullin me in the house and nobody home and I'm tryin to scream and I can't scream and I'm cryin.

[Church] was kinda thrust on me when I was real young. And in fact the night I met my wife, things was real bad again. I mean I wasn't doin drugs, but I was on the edge emotionally, and I was angry. I was frustrated. I felt emotionally out of control. I wouldn't say church so much as tryin to have a relationship with God. That's somethin that's been with me for a very long time. It wasn't so much the structure of the place but it's a kind of relationship with God. I understand God or this thing greater than me, more powerful than me. I felt, at an early age and throughout times in my life that was [the] thing that had protected me and been with me. To me Jesus is a white man concept, something that I have no personal experience with. But I feel like one with God.

[A]t the art school one of the teachers had told me about this little chapel that she was attending. So I finally decided to go, and I met my wife. They had a continental breakfast and I met her there that Saturday and it was just instant attraction. I just liked her from the first...and someone had offered me something to eat from the breakfast and I made the comment that I didn't eat anything good for me, and she made a crack "Well, that's all we have around here" and she walked away. And that kinda started the relationship. She went on a vacation for two weeks and I went to church every day lookin for her but she wasn't there. Then I got it that she wouldn't be there for a couple more days or so.

I was put out of art school because I didn't have the balance of the tuition. I was livin with [my friend]. We had a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor in this house. I was workin as a dishwasher at the Crepe Place. I went from dishwasher to cook. I worked there for a period of time while I was living with that friend of mine. But then with my wife, we decided to be roommates after we'd known each other about four months or so.

[...She] wanted to be roommates as livin together, and I just wanted to be roommates as in [s]haring an apartment. And that didn't work out for us. One day she came home and she said this wasn't workin for her, and I

was kinda shocked about it. I had just quit my job and I was gonna look for a different job and she just said it wasn't workin out and that I would have to move. She had the apartment. It was a one bedroom apartment and I slept in the living room on the couch. So when that didn't work out I ran into a friend of mine that I had met workin at the Crepe Place. Then he told me about this job at nights bein a dishwasher [a]nd that a friend of his had this apartment in the ghetto where I could stay if I needed. I moved out [when] she told me it wasn't workin out and I was lookin for some rooms.

She never gave me a reason why. I just assumed because we was havin a relationship that she wanted somethin different than I was willin to give. I felt really disappointed and hurt by it, 'cause for the first time in my life I felt really close to someone. I had some money, at least enough to pay for a room till I found another job. And this guy, he was a homosexual and he said if you wanta stay here that most people that stayed in the house had a sexual relationship goin on...with him and with each other. It was strange. I did have sex with him that day and then it was like this isn't what I want to do or this isn't where I want to go. So after that, my friend told me about this other place. I took the offer and my wife helped me move over to this place which was pretty much the same type of neighborhood I grew up in. She wanted to know how I was gonna make it and how I was gonna be and I was kinda like "I don't see why that's important to you if you don't want me livin with you."

The pastor of the church occasionally saw me walkin and he would give me a ride home. But I took the job as a dishwasher at this all night diner. I had this really tiny room at this house, and it was like you don't have to pay me but if you give me somethin it will be okay. So, whatever I was makin I'd give them half of it for the room. I lived there for a while and then I decided I had to get out of there 'cause this guy was in his 60s.

[It was] a repeat of just everything I'd already been through for a lot of years. There's just enough inside, that you have more strength of character not to be overcome by these people or this situation. I never contemplated suicide actually until I got involved with the mental health profession. Their whole approach to courage and fortitude always seems to come from forces outside: "[I]f you're goin to succeed you're going to

need to be with a group." In my experiences, most groups fail because of their lack of internal fortitude and commitment. They rely on each other when really that reliance needs to be that inner flame; that's when you're the most challenged. That's when your relationship with God is so important because this happened very early in my life. It's just you and that source.

And that's how I felt a lot of times as a kid. Like, why didn't I just leave Miss Bird? I talked to a friend of mine and he says "Why do women stay in things where they're battered and beat and don't leave?" As a kid it's a little bit different than an adult, 'cause as an adult, you can go out and get a job. You can go and you can get on a bus and go somewhere, even if you don't have any relatives. You can go. There's an actual way. You may be bound there by emotions but you can actually go.

In the situation I was in, that first night that I left, and I walked out of there, I walked to the corner [and] it's like what are your options? You knew sexual things would happen to other kids, or you knew that kids had been hit by cars. So you knew that this wasn't a safe place to be, and it's already 8:00 at night and it's dark. So the only thing you can do is learn how to survive in the place that you are in, how to adapt to that place for survival, you know even if these people supposedly have your best interest at heart, they're not comin through, you're just the bare minimum.

With me, that's where my relationship with God came in, 'cause I knew that I had to figure out some way to survive. And I think at the time I was more afraid of dyin than livin. So I just prayed a lot, and I tried to keep in touch with God. Well death to me was real dark, like a lot of places we lived. I think I prayed mostly at night. I don't recall things being cold as much as I recall them being dark. And I equated death with darkness.

The first night I really remember experiencing fear is when I heard Miss Bird and Mr. Lloyd talkin about the end, the world was goin crazy and the whole situation was just out of control. And I remember havin this real strong feelin in my gut, in my heart that God wouldn't put me here and then destroy the world. I don't know if I heard people talkin about God before. I don't know

when any of that kicked in. I knew my parents had left me, but I just couldn't believe that I was here and then the whole thing would be destroyed. That was a concept that I couldn't understand or believe. So ever since that moment, it's always been I'm gonna find out what's out there. I don't mean in terms of a house or a Mercedes Benz or any of those things. But I'm gonna find some peace on this earth as I understood it. And that's where I took off. I was more afraid of death than livin.

Me and my wife begin to become friends again and we worked through some things, just as friends. And then we decided to get married, or I decided we should get married. And one night we started goin to church together again. One night I told the members of the church that we was gettin married. So it was an actual commitment in front of people. We got engaged and we got married in October all within the same year.

She had graduated lab school near her home and I think her first job was in the Veterans Administration hospital. So she was there and our common denominator was church. I thought marriage would stabilize us, but it just took off. We got married in '80 and then we started makin career decisions. My plan was I put her through school and then she put me through school and 10 years later we [would] both be making \$20,000 a year or something. Well, that plan didn't work out too well. I got this job as a janitor, and I was gonna put her through school.

She was going to the community college. But she really didn't want to be in college. She was flunkin out of these classes, but I never knew. Meanwhile at my job, she used to walk to work with me. [M]ost of the janitors were black [where I worked] and the people runnin the show were white. So my supervisor says to me my first day back to work after my honeymoon, "You know, it's not a good idea for you to bring your wife around." "They don't like that." It's like she's white and you're black and you're flauntin that you're with a white woman. He was black. He was really black [i]n the sense that he grew up with blacks don't mix with whites, and part of it was a real fear of what whites might do. And part of it was his own prejudices comin through also. I think the job lasted maybe another month.

So that didn't work out, but unknowns to me it was workin out perfect for her because she didn't want to go to school anyway. She pretty much picked right up where she left off. Then I decided to go to school, but we had a couple of rough months in between there. I decided to go to school and she decided to work full-time and somehow that didn't work out. I don't know exactly what happened but it just didn't work out, me goin to school and her workin. I wanted to go to school, but she wasn't supportive of me goin to school. [A]nd I wasn't willin to just work any job because that wasn't gettin me anywhere. So it was more tension in the air.

My feeling was she wanted me to be workin, and it didn't matter what I was doing as long as I was workin. And if I just wanted to work I could just do that. I didn't need to be married to work and not better myself. [S]he was like men work and we both would just work. So our approaches were different and we really wasn't compatible. [And] I hit that slump again. I started going into my tailspin. I went to school for about a semester, and I didn't really feel that I was bein supported at home and [I] lost interest. I started drinkin and doing drugs again, mostly when she wasn't around. And then if I wasn't drinkin or doing drugs, I was just in a state of depression. And that lasted for almost 5 years. After the first year of marriage I hit that tail spin and I stayed in it for about 4 years. I wasn't drinkin or smokin excessively but it was just enough not to come out.

Then when I was ready to come out of it. I had trouble with my foot. My tendon was on the side of the bone and I couldn't afford the operation. I couldn't get any [government] assistance because she was workin, yet we didn't have enough money to have the operation done. And then finally she wanted to get out of the tail spin too. It was really hard on her those years. And that's when she decided to join the Navy, after our fifth year. She realized that she needed an education to move on. I was supportive of that. She joined the Navy and I got my foot operated on and everything. And we both went through changes the next five years, where we was separated enough to see that we wanted to really be together. [T]he first five years in the Navy, I think we'd been together a total of about five or six months. She had to go to boot camp and school.

[W]hen she went into the military, a friend of mine who I met in art school, lived in West Virginia, and I moved to West Virginia just before she went. Right before she actually went off we separated. It was like you're going into the military. I'm going to West Virginia, because it seems like this isn't workin out. We were separated maybe two months or so, and we was writin back and forth and talkin to each other on the phone, and I just told her over the phone that I don't think this is workin out, so maybe we should look at a divorce.

I called her one night and she wasn't home, and that wasn't her. She was stayin at the YMCA and I had a room in West Virginia. And I finally got in touch with her the next morning, and she had said she had been out with somebody. And she asked did I think we could get together and I told her just to pack her bags and she took the bus to West Virginia.

I think that was about the worst, except for childhood, time in my life, because all of those feelings from childhood started comin back. I got real paranoid. I could trust my feelins on some things but if that person over there isn't honest with me... [I]f I say "Are you havin some type of feelins for me" and you do, but the signs are different, that's a lot of what happened in childhood. I couldn't tell when she was bein honest with me. I couldn't tell what was goin on in our relationship. So I went through this period for several months, and she finally went into [the Navy.] I think we was together 8 months and I was in this real bad tail spin for 6 of those 8 months.

[O]nce she actually left and went to boot camp, it begin to subside and I begin to swim and exercise [again.] I don't know, if it is a result of childhood or the things I've been through, but I know what I want to do and where I want to go, and it's a lot easier for me to do that without a lot of external information or feedback. I could get the picture clearer again by myself, because I didn't have to consider somebody else's feelings or what they wanted. That's when I operate at my best. I needed to be with her, and at the same time it's kind of difficult for me to go and do what I have to do. I can go and do things with an intensity and detachment. When I try to [consider other people's feelings] I usually produce less in whatever

I'm doin. I mean truly I function a lot better without external input.

It takes a constant rededication. It takes a constant talking to [my wife] about where I'm going. I say constant; it's almost on a daily basis that I remind her of what direction I want to go and where I want to be within a certain period of time, and askin her what does she think, but still keepin that self directness. [I]t's a constant struggle to rededicate, recommit to that goal I set not only for me but for us in the future, something that we'll both benefit from.

Sometimes, I need to sleep in the other room because I need to have that time to myself to figure out what I want to do, to get back in touch with that commitment and that challenge. Sometimes it's almost too easy because she is in the military. She does have a certain amount of financial security, job security. She is pretty much willin to give me whatever I want within what she has monetarily. So I have to go and commit myself to makin these accomplishments on my own. [I]t's easy to get lax, 'cause I don't have to really worry about the rent. We just don't have a lot of extra. All the needs that I used to have to really struggle for are there, and so now I have to set my sights on 1) making myself a better person, 2) havin more monetarily. It's a real struggle because all the basics are there. I have the food, I have the shelter. I have the car. I have all these luxury items. So the monetary needs are [met] but there's no inward call or struggle now.

Just now after ten years she wants to go back to the original plan of one of us going to school then help the other person, [and] when that person gets able so that they can help the other person, they pull 'em up. So her career has really taken off, her career is almost solid, given the state of affairs in America right now. But now she's just comin around and sayin "Yes, maybe it would help me if I helped you in the long run. [W]e'd both benefit from it." [S]he came to see that I have a lot of potential and more than just sweepin a floor or something. I have a really great potential to not only make money but just be a really unique person.

I guess I started when I was about maybe 13, 14, somewhere along in there. We used to listen to the black stations a lot, and I grew up on WOL or WOK and on

Sundays there was a lot of gospel, a lot of preachin. During the week it was a lot of boogie type music. At night I would listen to jazz sometimes. But it seemed like black music was either really punked up, really adrenalin type stuff or the gospel was a lot of sadness or feelins that the afterlife would be better than this. So even though I grew up on those kinds of things, I didn't feel I was limited to that.

At the same time I was goin through a lot of trouble, with schoolin, tryin to fit in or not tryin to fit in. I used to come across public radio, and I would just start listenin to the music, and the music would somehow [be] so much clearer. There wasn't any real emotion; you could listen without any real emotions tied to it. Black music is some type of emotion tied in with the music somehow. But classical music, there wasn't any emotion tied into it! I got a stereo and I would try to find different music, something different from what I was accustomed to, and see what it felt like, where it would put me mentally. And I found with classical music I could think a lot clearer. Sometimes I would listen to classical music and use drugs, and it didn't mix. [T]he drugs would make me more depressed. But the classical music would make me see things or think about things in a clearer, more positive way.

So the music started when I was about, 13, 14, somewhere along in there. Whenever things were kinda real bad and I didn't want to dope out, I would listen to the music. I went through this thing where I painted my bedroom. I had plants, but my plants died . I had plants and I played classical music and at the same time I had those velvet posters and I had one with the lights that was purple. So it was sort of a mixture.

The literature came in high school. I had a couple of white teachers. I believe it was my tenth grade. And one of the first books they wanted us to read was Chaucer, Canterbury Tales. And for some reason the teacher took an interest in me. "You should read Canterbury Tales and Nikki Giovanni. I would sit in class and I would be mad most of the time. I would write stuff and she would come and read it. It was English writing class I believe. I liked reading Shakespeare because it was different. It was something aside from what I was used to or what everyone else was doing. But at the same time I didn't understand what they was talking about. I enjoyed it but I didn't understand it.

It's not until now that I been more away from Blacks and I'm beginnin to accept them more as my people. This is the race I come from. And the things that we do is all a part of just livin. But the thing that always bothered me since I was small was [that there was] a limitation. It's like we have to think, be, and act this way. There's nothing else. When I was 11 or so, the sexton [of the church] and his sister, would take me out on holidays. And they would take me to movies and we would eat at the white restaurants. We went to white theaters. I also got to see other things other than just in that little microcosm I was in.

We had black theaters and I rejected 'em in part because I went to these theaters but I would see an advertisement for the Jungle Book or something like that, and I'm like we don't get the Jungle Book here. All we got were the Shaft type things. There's one theater, the Broadway that I used to go to, where I was influenced by James Bond in Thunderball. I think I adopted him for a hero, and he was cool and he knew all of this stuff. His boss would ask him "Taste this wine" and he'd say "It's a Marseille from Paris" and I thought it was cool because he knew all of this stuff. I kinda picked people that I wanted to be like, and so I think it was part of that quest to have different information like that.

[W]hen I was small, the house was real crazy, and there was a lot of beatings, if you [were] real quiet your perception can be developed or heightened, and you can have a intuition about things. [L]ike, the new people that came here that are in class now. I have a basic feeling or intuition, not so much because maybe they're poor or Black or Spanish or any of that. It doesn't really have too much to do with their race as it is what's coming from them as a person. And I got older, it's just expanded to a broader field. [S]ometimes when I withdraw or get kinda weird is because I'm sensin somethin, it's that little voice inside. I'm sensin somethin and I'm tryin to separate it from past negative events that happened to me. It's a reaction or response.

I don't think I'm that intellectual. Other people have said that I were intellectual or smart. But to me it's just common sense more or less. Intellectual to me is a person that reads a lot but also have a profound understandin of what they readin and can interpret that

in different ways. [Or it can be a] directness of purpose. People that are able to say the right thing at the right time, removed emotionally from the situation, just cool about the whole thing, [who] can respond in a nonemotional way. a chess player; a person that can sit down and have concentration that lasts for hours and hours. A person that is disciplined.

I don't feel that I'm disciplined. I study, I read a chapter, two chapters, three chapters in a book, but very seldom do I finish the book. [A]t home I have lots of books and I've even gotten rid of some of them. I have maybe 50 books, and I've only actually read from cover to cover 15 of 'em. The other books I use as references. I read a chapter, two chapters of it, and somebody will say somethin and that will get me thinkin. When I'm [working] at the library. Sometimes when I'm puttin books on the shelves I look and see what book this is and I read a couple of pages out of it. And I say this is what they're talkin about. I would go in bookstores and do the same thing. I wouldn't read the whole book but I would pick up books that are in the metaphysical section, or the literature section, and I would read a page or two. And then later, somebody will say something and I'll go "Oh, that's what that book was referring to or that's where that experience came from." So I consolidate the experiences of what people are sayin from reading.

I seek knowledge a lot. I seek to know things. I like learning different things. I think one of the problems I had with jobs is I get bored. I used to get bored in elementary school. So some of the teachers said I was stupid or dumb because I didn't talk much. And in the first grade, I would sit halfway back but I couldn't see the blackboard, and the teacher kept me back, and it wasn't until the second year that the teacher noticed I was squinting. And she had me get an eye exam and I needed glasses.

I used to watch people and listen to people, and used to figure things out and they would call me stupid. Actually I would be sittin there thinkin that I'm a brilliant motherfucker because I'm not playin the game that you want me to play. And I was reading something about slavery just the other day, and the author pointed out that he thought Steppin Fetchit was really quite intelligent, because a lot of the slaves were literally workin themselves to death in the field, and Steppin

Fetchit was one that kinda reinforced what the slave master wanted: lazy, shufflin type of thing. But the author pointed out that Steppin Fetchit really outlasted a lot of the other slaves because of that.

I had this rule in the house when we got married and the rule was nobody puts their hands on anybody else. I knew that I had a volatile temper, and I studied karate. So I had this rule. We had been married close to a year, maybe nine months or so. My wife wanted to talk. She wanted to get some things settled about finances and what was goin on with us. And I'm "I don't want to hear it right now. I don't want to talk about it right now." I used to get real angry at the drop of a hat. I know I wasn't functioning too well, and I needed time to sort it out. And then I could come back and talk. I said "I'm leavin. I'm goin out for a walk." And she grabbed me, and I didn't know this till years later, but when she grabbed me I took her hand and the most I would do was break her wrist and break her elbow. But it was years later that she said to me "Not only did you have my wrist and my elbow, but you had put your leg behind mine and you had my back over your knee and your elbow in my throat, and I do recall in this situation hearin her say "Don't hurt me" and that cut the light on. It brought me back to a conscious level and I let her go and I left. [I]t's ironic.

That's the closest I actually came to killin a person. I never wanted anyone to touch me again. [T]hat was one of my biggest fear about bein stopped by the police or being harassed or pushed against the cars. I was really out of control at that time. [N]ow it takes more to get me to that place, but once I get to that place I'm kinda unreasonable. But that kind of surprised me that I did that to her. I hadn't realized that I was that much out of control... a black out. She used to be kind of afraid of me but that really put her in a place where she wouldn't get near me.

[S]ay someone came in behind us and just touched me, in shoppin malls. Anybody that would get that close to me...they in my space. My wife used to say "We're in the mall. There's hundreds of people" and I'm like "Yeah, but they don't have to get in my space." I would carry an umbrella and deliberately put it under my arm to keep people from gettin close to me. So closeness was

a real trouble spot. [M]ost of the touching that I had experienced had been negative, a beating or some type of physical or sexual abuse. So a touch just sent a shock wave through my body.

[I]n the last few years desensitized myself, touchin has begun to be okay. But sometimes I notice if I'm talkin to you and we're laughin or somethin, and I get real happy and I touch your shoulder or somethin, and the first coupla times I did that I was like, I hope I didn't offend her that I was bein too, forward. So, I'm very aware. I don't react like I used to but I'm very aware of closeness or touching, especially with girls. I don't just mean sexually, but I'm very aware that this person is this close to me, that they're a inch and a half away from me.

My male cousin that we talked about earlier, if I were to pick a person that I felt was a older brother to me, that really really cared about me, it would be him. And when I went home a couple of years ago, we got high and we smoked and we drank. We went to see Robocop. We got a pint of Hennessy, and he borrowed an Olds Delta 88 from somebody. [W]e both were in [our] 30s, and not saying that we hadn't made the best decisions in our life or that we hadn't been responsible enough, but there was just somethin about that, even though he didn't have much. He was livin with his sister, but what he did have he was willin to share with me. [I]t's like here we are two men, I'm livin with my wife, he's livin with his sister. We hadn't really evolved or grew that much, what you would expect I guess from men in their 30s, but at the same time, even to that day, what little we had we shared with each other. And, so sometimes now when I drive around, I pump up the music and I think about him.

We talk about [my wife's family] almost on a daily basis. I met all of them when they came down to visit. A coupla months ago. [H]er mother writes pretty regularly. But I don't really write or call them. I feel close to them in a vicarious way through her. She's closer to them than I would ever imagine a family to be. But at the same time she's not as close. I met the parents once. They're farmers and they have since retired from farmin. I met the father and he was "Nice meetin ya son and I'm off to plow the field" and her mother looked at

me and she spoke and then she started cryin and ran in the house. She's from this little town with very few if any black people there. And [my wife] talked to her mom and I guess she consoled her that everything would be okay. And I'm lookin at the sun gettin ready to go down and I don't want to be caught in this part of the world with this white woman. But it was a hard good-bye because she had to reassure her mother.

I realized that it was a real hard time for her because she was makin the decision that would split her and her mother. They wasn't close and this wasn't gonna bring 'em any closer. So that distance was there and I'm hopin that this didn't bring pain into her life, gainin one thing and losin something else. But in a way she did. I don't know if it happens if you're not an interracial couple, but it did. It's just now beginnin to be okay and it's goin on ten years now. We kid a lot and she tells me "In ten more years you'll be able to call her on the phone."

I liked coming [to the Learning Center] in the summer and I liked workin by myself. I have some personal, specific goals that I wanted to meet or accomplish, and that worked out pretty good. Settin the time I could come and havin someone check with me; I could just report my progress to them occasionally. I didn't feel that there was real time pressure or anything. When school started with the Adult Education and the placement program, then it became more of a struggle to come with the different people.

For me sometimes it's torn between individual goals or achievements [and] workin with a group. I found it harder workin with a group, 'cause each person is at a different level. [A]lso the other people seem to socialize more than I cared to. I have a specific reason for coming here. It's not to really socialize and make friends or interact with people that much. I don't mind havin an individual relationship but it's difficult. And it's difficult bein with a lot of women. I don't want to get personally involved.

[I]t seems that a lot of the students are single, yet they are mothers. So there seems to be that vulnerability. I get a sense that they are vulnerable emotionally or something. I noticed that a few women that I did get a little bit closer to here are the ones that are married,

and are older. So I feel a little bit more comfortable with that. I work with them if I have to or need to, but I basically prefer to [keep] a distance between us so there's no misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

I'm more willin to learn now, and I'm more willin to go further in my own education. The basic program that I worked with this summer, I enjoyed. I don't particularly care too much for the program that I'm in now with the remedial/on the job training. I'm not too enthusiastic about that program. I feel that decisions about what I need to learn is placed in the hands of a third party, someone that I don't interact with on a personal level. They are at a distance. (Note: There is a training agent from the program director's office in Miami who sets learning contracts and evaluates participants' progress prior to graduation.)

[M]y interaction with my immediate counselor, we can come to an understanding of what I need and what I want as a person, also as to what would fit into the curriculum of the program. [B]ut I feel that if her and I can come to an understanding, there's still this third person who can come along and say "No, that doesn't work" or "That's not acceptable." I was really enthusiastic about learning word processing and then it seems when that program came about the whole set up changed. At first I was really disappointed so I had to rethink and restructure my career plans so that I could walk away from here feeling more positive about the program. In one way it made me redirect my energies and thinkin into going into college. On the other hand it's a constant struggle to fulfill the contract that I have, to get a job.

[M]y personal feelins are if a job doesn't come up that I feel comfortable with, I'm not gonna take it. I feel that I might personally walk away with something more because I might enter into college. I feel that with my counselor here [t]here's a feelin that I might not complete the program in the way the program is set up. That's how I feel. I feel that if I came here and learned and will take that to pursue higher education, I consider that a success. But from what I understand about the program, it's actually a placement in a job. I personally would feel that's very successful, to take a person from a fifth grade reading level, math, English level [and] prepare him to go to college, and gettin an associate's degree in science, and goin into computer management or library science, I would say that would be a damn good success for the program.

[O]ne of the reasons I wanted to really learn the ins and outs of word processing is I was really prepared to go into the work force. But after bein here awhile and improvin in the other skills and talkin with the counselor and that was more or less the initiation to start lookin at college, seein that I did have the capacity to take on academic pursuits and make accomplishments. So it came about as that. When the on the job training program came about I had less of a feelin that a job would advance me that much further than when I first started here.

I was concerned whether I'd have the same amount of guidance, attention or acceptability with the staff if I did just come and study for college. So it was only after I actually got into the program that I begin to have some differences of what direction I might want to go in. I feel if there wasn't that third party there, (training agent from Miami) I could come to a more [amicable] solution with the counselor. I felt a certain amount of imposedness on me; you need to do this reading skill, this math skill, this English skill. I feel that [there is] a person from a distance making conclusions not seein or not having a personal interaction there.

When I [was] studyin for my GED, or even in high school. I felt at times it was neat discoverin things with the teacher. But sometime I have had trouble with the way the system has set up the curriculum. There's somethin that I want to explore or there's somethin that I want to learn there that holds my interest. The system is set up that there's no reward in that particular area that I'm interested in, but there is a reward over here. So I only do the curriculum over there to get to what I want to study over here. I would say that's the norm.

You have to tolerate a certain amount of bullshit, it's a weeding out process that doesn't necessarily mean the best people end up in the proper positions. But I see college as a opportunity to learn things or to become exposed to things that I have rejected in the past because of my personal experiences. [A]t the same times at this point in my life I feel more consolidated as a person so that I can take what I want from that and leave the rest.

I feel ten years ago the place I was mentally and physically and spiritually, even if someone were to hand me a scholarship, I still woulda, had this thing about what are the strings attached to it? When you do get certain opportunities or breaks, you have to ask the deeper

question, "Is this really what I want?" "Is this just an opportunity I'm takin because I haven't had this opportunity before?" [W]here I come from most people would say "Man, you have an opportunity of a lifetime." But that opportunity doesn't necessarily mean the same thing here as it does over there. I could say "Here, I'll give you a Jaguar" but you might desire to have a house more than a Jaguar, so you would say "No, I don't want the Jaguar" and people would "Oh man, she's crazy." I feel that a lot of times because I am black and because I have been disadvantaged, that sometimes people have given me keys to Jaguars when I just want a key to a library or computer, somethin that is of some value to me.

I been challenged in a lot of ways in my life, but this is one of the first challenges of actually [being] responsible and required to make decisions in what directions and what I'm gonna do with my life. I was reading about lifelong learnin, and one of the things it required was motivation; you have to have motivation. You have to have a certain attitude. I don't remember the words at this time, but I'm really ready to focus in a different direction. I'd say a more positive direction now.

[Among students here] it seems to me is that there's been a lot of disappointments in their life, not failures but a lack of opportunities. It seems that there's been a lot of negative things in their life experiences, whether it's been failed relationships or alcohol and drugs or whatever. It just seems that they didn't come from positive backgrounds and situations. The other common thread is it seems to also have something to do with intimate relationships. Somehow it seems that there's been some trouble or a problem with intimate relationships, or bein close to people.

I resent [being called "smart" or "intelligent"]. One of the tapes that play for me in my head when someone says "Oh, you're smart" is "Why, black people are not supposed to be smart?" And that's even with my own race. So it's not necessarily just a racial thing. The problem for me with the intelligent part is I was able to understand or align myself on an intellectual level, but on an emotional level I felt the same as my peers, so that was a conflict. So for me there's been this constant bridge in my life. Intellectually I'm over here with the authority figures, management or whatever, but emotionally I'm over here with my peers. So [it's a] feelin of bein caught between the two.

I don't know if in my lifetime if I'm able to develop [a sense of family] for myself. By that I mean a real, intimate relationship with my wife and raise kids of my own. I've started in a direction of just tryin to make myself whole mentally and spiritually and physically. I don't know if I have the time or the wherewithal to begin to make those kind of connections in my life. It's kinda sad but I can't think about it as being sad. I can't feel, sorry for myself or grieve about that. I do at times in an indirect way get kinda mad about it. I can and do feel really hostile towards pretty much anyone or anything outside of myself. I still have problems with this latent hostility or anger.

Sometimes [my wife and I] kid about [having kids]. Part of it would be neat. Interesting to see what the kid would look like, whether it's a boy or girl. But on the other hand even though I talk about it and it feels good inside, it's changin gears to make that kinda commitment. It's a lot of sacrifices, We have thought about maybe adoptin someone. So as we get older that's a possibility. Also the fact that my wife in the position of being the actual bread winner, that doesn't set too well with me. [I]f I was a writer or somethin and I was home, then I wouldn't mind keepin the kid at home. I think I could manage, change diapers and all of that.

So if the roles were reversed or if we had worked together at a earlier stage in our marriage, whereas I would be completing school now and being lined up to find a better career or whatever. I grew up with guys who was going out fatherin a kid, and to me more is required than to go out and just get the booty and have kids. I know guys "Oh man, I got three sons out here" and they haven't done shit for them other than father them. So there's certain values that I hold.

[T]here's been so many negative patterns in my life. I mean my mother was had out of wedlock. Her mother remarried and the man that she married was a deacon in the church, and this man had no idea that my aunt and my mother were actually his step-daughters. My aunt called her mother Aunt Frances, and she did the same pattern with me. She adopted me as her son when in actuality I was her nephew. So that distortion, that craziness, all of that they transferred. I didn't need any psychotherapist to tell me that this is really a fucked up situation and that it's a generational thing. My half-sister became pregnant when she was 13. I think in the course of 13 to 18 she's had, three or four

kids before she had her tubes tied. I said there's so much garbage there, me just tryin to be sane is enough to keep my busy for a while in my life.

For myself I feel that I really have done it this time. Before I came here I broke the physical part of the cycle. Unfortunately I haven't exercised the way I was used to, liftin and things of that nature. I've gained the weight back so I don't feel good about that. But on the intellectual side, the achievement side, I feel that I've actually broken some real mental barriers here even after 18 months of psychotherapy. I've actually broken that mental barrier and I can see some things for the first time in a whole different perspective.

I've been processin that whole issue of self-esteem the last two years. And I was readin somethin W.E.B. DuBois wrote and the conclusion that I'm comin to is even as a child it was never that I felt bad about myself. I did feel bad that I wasn't with my mother. I did question why my mother didn't keep me. I'm not sayin that I haven't felt bad. But more important than that, the thing with self-esteem is I feel more that the real conflict is not havin parents and tryin to fit in society or tryin to be an adult male when there's no forerunners that I've experienced. So it's not so much feelin bad or negative about myself as how to blaze a trail.

Postscript

After the completion of the interviews, Louis' aunt passed away and he attended the funeral. She had left some money in the form of bonds to his step-brothers and sisters. But when he went home, he learned that nothing had been left to him. The executor of the will informed Louis that his aunt had used all of his bonds to help him pay the tuition at the art school he attended.

Louis graduated from the program and we found him a position as a Media Assistant/Library Aide in the library at the local community college. He is enjoying the work and gaining valuable experience. Although he has some differences with the new assistant librarian, he continues to receive praises for his work from his other superiors. He is attending night classes in English composition and basic math at the same community college and hopes to complete an associate's degree.

His wife is still in the Navy and is finishing her tour of duty here. When she is transferred, Louis hopes to enroll in a four year college to complete a degree in library science. From all indications at present, he seems to have found his trail to blaze.

Gloria Rodriguez

Gloria is a 29 year old woman of Mexican-American descent. She is the single mother of three children, two of whom currently live with her. The oldest resides with her mother in another state. Gloria had been coming to the Learning Center the longest. When she graduated from the program, she had been attending classes for a little over a year. Gloria participated in the On-the-Job-Training Program.

"What brought you to the Learning Center?"

I was on welfare, and the baby was just turnin three. And the system changed. I sat there with all these ladies. And my name came up, and I introduced myself, and [the counselor] introduced himself to me. And he told me, have you ever worked? What have you ever done in your life?" And I told him, "Nothing, really. I just moved here." And he told me, "Well, the benefits here are changin and we need to get you rolling and get you in a job and get you in a good position, now" I said, "I'll go for it! I'm ready!" And he signed me up here to the Harris School.

I was real bad on writing, and talking. And not learning how to spell words or anything. I didn't know nothin! I mean, it's like I had started all over again. I started comin and I started gettin into more things. History started interesting me. I said, "God, I can't believe I missed so much!" So much that now I don't know. I went for my first test in G.E.D. This was like a blessin to me, because it's the first time, I had a chance to come back up--pick myself up from where I was. Learnin again how to be someone I guess! [Before coming to the Learning Center] the baby was with me. I had to watch him--pottytrainin him half of the year. [I would] sit down and watch soap operas. Go fishin. Go to the beaches. And wait for that little shitty check to come out.

I felt scared at first, [when they said I had to go to school] because when they said, "God, if you don't participate with us in this, you're just gonna lose all your benefits." Man, and if that's what you've lived off for two years, you don't have no choice! So I made the best of it, my schedule had to change. I couldn't be with my baby no more. Broke my heart. I cried more when I left him at the day care center. I knew we had to let go of each other. One day it had to come.

I felt, like I had to be--I was pushed. I started makin good of it. I didn't want the people to be on me everyday. I didn't want them to say, "Miss Rodriguez., we're gonna have to check on her every day". So I tried to do my best, so people could see that I was interested. I didn't want them to think, "She's scared she's gonna lose her check." But, then, like I said I made the best of it. And up to this day, I'm glad I did. I didn't want people to be on me. I didn't want to feel like I was in prison; I had to do that one little thing.

And here I am, I'm free. Just comin to a classroom and pickin up your skills. I knew I had to do that one day. And I'm very glad. I liked it! I came and I sat down and I read. I was interested! I wanted to catch up on what happened all them eleven years that I just dropped out and didn't know nothin. I was ready! I was determined. And I was here every day. I didn't even think this existed. I enjoyed it because I didn't have to sit at home all the time by myself. I been [in Key West] three years, but I never got out. I guess I never associated very good with anybody. But this learning center brought me down here and I sit here. I talk. I laugh. I share my problems.

And then when I used to sit over there and watch [the computer class] to me, I'd see [the teacher] and I would say, "God, I would never be over there, sittin down over there by her, her teachin me. I'm too stupid!" "She's got a lotta skills. She's got a lotta mind. She's got her thing together!" I would see her as a real scientist, a real big thing, like a professor of some kind. The way she was teachin and she would just go up there and just push one button and solve the problem! When I first saw her I felt, "Oh, God, she's too high society for me!" She looked like a lady! I've seen all these people, these rich people, and I say, "She's one 'a them!" "She's one 'a them leisure kinds!" She had nice clothes on and everythin.

And finally I got to be in one room with somebody with money!. And I said, "Well, she'll never talk to me. I'm an ol' rat because the two years just sittin at home. I got a chance to be by myself. My kids were taken care of. I got to start thinkin about how to use my mind again! I felt bored. I felt locked in. I mean, just sittin home, you can just think about the whole thing that you've done wrong...what you're missin of life. Watching the kid. Watchin soap operas. I felt locked in.

Scenes from a life.

I was twenty-five years old when I came down here. Maybe goin on twenty-six. I felt like I had lost everything. God, almighty! I didn't know nobody. I was in very bad trouble. I was [on the verge] of them takin my kids away from me, and I had a real bad drug problem. My life was messed up. I felt if I stayed around there, [in Texas] that them people were gonna automatically take me to jail--the social service people that were behind me because of the person that I was involved with. And I had to get out. And I came to Key West.

At that time, they tol' me, "Well, we'll just put you to jail and take your kids to a foster home. You'll never see 'em again." Oh, God, that hurts. Just to think about that. And I said, "God, I just have to get out of this mess. I've gotta get out of this mess." There was that drug problem, the biggest drug problem there was in [the town where I was living.] I come from a small community and everybody knew everybody. And we were in the papers. We were in TV, me and the "candyman." He was a Cuban, and he was pushin drugs. He's killed people. And I've seen it. And I guess that's one 'a the reasons why these people would threaten to take my kids away, 'cause they knew I was involved. But we're like a Bonnie and Clyde, really. It was an adventure. God, I don't know how in the hell I got into it, but I did. I got into it bad.

Well, it all happened in Texas, where I come from. My mother was involved with a Cuban that she met. [I was] having problems with my little girl's father at the time; we were living together as a family then. He was screwin around with his sister-in-law, and I found out about it. And it just didn't work anymore. And so, here comes my ma, with these five Cubans and one they called the "candyman". And they all come in these dressy suits. They were all dressed up and it was so weird, because I never in my life have seen or heard an accent of a Cuban.

I was just a li'l ol' country girl. We were all drunk and we smoked weed and everything. My daughter was two years old. And I met all the guys. And then here comes candyman and he shook my hand and looked at me, and he tol' me, in Spanish, I will never forget what he said, now that I understand what it meant. The first time that I shook his hand, he was lookin into my eyes, and he told me, "You are gonna be mine." I laughed! I took it as a joke! He was ugly! I wasn't flattered! And everybody, all my friends said, "God almighty, I can't believe you're gonna get involved with somethin like that!" And I said, "Me?!"

"Never!!" My mother was dating one of the guys. That was her pride and joy after my daddy. And these were all his friends. They were gangsters. One was pushin weed; the other one was carryin it. The other one was gettin the money.

And about a month later, one night, me and [my daughter's] father got into it. I was drunk. I was out of it. And I got a crowbar, I broke all his windshields from the car. And my daughter at the time was with my sister. So he ran, and was gonna call the police on me. And I said, "Uh, uh, I'm not goin to jail for you." I found myself hitch-hiking. I was drunk. I don't even know how I got [to my mother's house.] But I hitch-hiked all the way. I remember leavin around three o'clock in the morning. I got there about two in the afternoon. God, I was pathetic! I looked terrible when I went in and knocked on my momma's trailer. She goes, "What are you doin?" And I said, "I left it. I'm tired of it." I sat down, she gave me somethin to eat, I went and took my bath. And I just set there. We didn't talk. But she knew at the time I was havin problems with [Melissa's] father. I knew it was over. [It] gave me time to think. "What am I gonna do?"

Fall in Hell! That's what I did. I fell in Hell. Oh, God, I didn't see Melissa in a whole month. My sister and her father [had her]. And all that time, I messed around, gettin drunk at my mom's house. Just livin it up! I didn't work. I just stayed there with my mom! Till them two days later came. The candyman knocked on the door, and he said, "I told you you were goin to be mine!" I was in El Paso the next day.

And the next thing I know, I'm wearin high heels. Beautiful dresses. God, I looked like a princess. And I was havin so much fun, I didn't even think about drugs or anything at the time. But I knew I had to bring 'em. I was the one that had to carry 'em back on the bus. In luggage. Some of it was coke. He told me, "I'll pay you some money. When we get to Odessa, I'll give you five hundred dollars, if you do it for me. Are you scared to do it?" I said, "No, it's a piece of cake. I'll do it!" I showed him I could do it. I mean, at the time, five hundred dollars for me for, God! Easy money!

So, he bought me some nice shoes. He dressed me up to look nice. He said, "You can just forget about the blue jeans and the T-shirts; they're gone. You're gonna start dressin up like a lady." So I found myself in this

beautiful dress and I couldn't believe myself! My hair, my makeup, everything! Everything I wanted, I walked in the store and I grabbed it and I put it down. And when he told me, "No, you will never make it. You'll give us away." And I say, "No, I won't." "Let me try it." I was determined to do it for five hundred dollars.

I knew it was illegal. But I didn't care. I didn't have nothin to lose. I was by myself. I knew I could make it from El Paso again. I was bad. I didn't care! I was hurt. They were crazy, these were crazy Cubans! [When we got back], I go, "Give me my five hundred dollars!" He gave it to me. It lasted me about a week. I bought my mother groceries. I helped her, and I asked her, "You need your bills paid?", or somethin? I gave her the money. And I told her, "Whatever you want, get it." At that time, money wasn't everything to me. Just as long as we had somethin to eat and there was a TV or music or whatever. We had lights. And we had our beer in the refrigerator. That was all that mattered to me. I didn't care!

She knew [where the money came from.] she had a problem, too. She had a very bad problem. And she smoked weed, mostly. She didn't start doin cocaine till about a year later. But then she got addicted to it. And she had to let it go. After that man hurt her and left her, she gave it up. She didn't find nothing in it, anymore.

I was there with my mom. And the candyman came by, and he told me, "You want to go to the dance?" And I found myself gettin involved with him. I didn't love him. I didn't feel nothin, but he was like a bank. And he was a good person. He was a funny person. He had a real sense of humor. That's what I saw in him. And he told me at the dance that he was fallin in love with me. And I was too damn drunk. I don't even hardly remember any of that, because I would stay drunk. I would stay drunk where I wouldn't have to see his face. He was ugly. I could never say that I loved him. Later on, yeah, I cried. When they took him away. And those feelings are on me now, for my little boy. I know that I will never have the candyman, but I'll have him as a part of my son. And he's always there. That little smile! Them eyes, them big feet are there! It's still with me. I mean, my son is him. That's little candy junior, that's him.

He put a chain and ball on me! We went to California. Melissa was always with a babysitter. I hired a lady to live with us. And I was already pregnant. I kept tellin

him, every time, "I need my pills. I need my pills." And he wouldn't take me to go get my pills. But then, I'd forget about it myself. I was livin it up! I was a picture of Bonnie! Bonnie and Clyde. I was wild. I was crazy. And I had him. He was there. He was my companion. I didn't have to worry about anything! He gave it all to me. I was pregnant. So I say, "Well, if I have to have this baby, I want my [daughter too]." And he went and got her for me. He and my mom went. I got too drunk. I had one of my head attacks. I just ran off and hid somewhere. To be alone. I found out I was pregnant and I didn't want it. I got drunk and he wouldn't leave me alone so I started takin off and I found myself in a bar. Just sittin there drinkin.

And then later on, somebody called a taxi and they took me home! My mother and candyman came with my little girl. I was already sobered up and everything at that time. And the next thing I know, I saw my little girl and she was dressed in a yellow dress with some yellow shoes. And a big ol' yellow bow in her hair. Then I went on, and made my life with candyman. We got us a little house. A one-bedroom house. He bought lamps and curtains.

[They were] importing the stuff, selling it, then distributing the money among them all. I would travel with him. I would sit around with my daughter at a restaurant, and we'd order and just sit there and wait for him to come. Which would be about an hour or two. These other guys had ladyfriends, girlfriends. So [they] would keep me company.

[That's] when it started happenin. When we got into the condominiums, my brother took all these guys over there and I was eight months pregnant. And [candyman] was out collecting money. And my brother brought all these guys in, and they started smoking and drinking. I was drinking me a beer. He walks in and saw all these guys there and all he did was grab me by my shirt and whopped me in my face. Because there were other guys, my brother was there, too. But there were other guys in the house.

He punched me. He hit me hard enough to blow the air outta me. I had to go to the emergency room, my labor pains started where I hit the ground hard. And I said, "No. No more. Once he hits you, he's gonna be hittin you for the rest of your life." And it was true. He started punching me every day. I would get punched. For any li'l thing. I guess his business was goin bad and he didn't have nobody to punch out, so he'd punch me out. And then he told me that the baby wasn't his. That the baby belonged to

somebody else. And we separated. We stayed separated for about three months. After he hit me the first time, I went back to my mom's house, which was living hell at that time, 'cause she wanted me to go back to him.

And weeks went on and I was still with my mother. And me and my mother had the urge to learn how to make money, too. So we started rollin our little joints and sellin em. And I showed my mother how I would see candyman profit his money. If you have ten dollars, you get five, save five, and you got five. And it went on and on like that, till we had a hundred dollars in our hands! And then here comes this other Cuban that knew my mom. He said, "Well, I'm fixin to go to El Paso, to go git me a pound of weed. Why don't you come? So y'all can see what y'all can make?" At the time, we had three hundred dollars. And that was all pot money. That was money that me and my mother were really makin.

So I said, "Come on, let's go!" And me and my mother went! We went to El Paso with this fool! God almighty. And I never will forget that was one time that me and my mother were holding hands, walkin down the streets in El Paso, lookin in the stores. She was like a mother. We had our little business we were runnin together, and then we had time to be mother and daughter again. I will never forget, when we went to El Paso, Texas.

[My son] was two weeks overdue and I had to have a caesarean. Oh, that broke my heart, 'cause my mother has had caesareans, and she almost died. So I got all paranoid and scared. He was a very big baby. [But] he was a sick baby. And that was because of me drinkin and doin drugs. The last eight months, I slowed down. I quit smokin and snorting. But I still had to have one beer in my hand, one little beer. And at that time, I had Medicaid. I couldn't get no check, 'cause my mother was already gettin a check. And I was livin in her house. I was satisfied with Medicaid, 'cause he was givin me money anyway.

But, we had complications, seein this little baby in a incubator. Tryin to breathe for his life because when they pulled him out, he drank some of that fluid and it watered his lungs. So they had to keep him in a incubator for at least twenty-four hours. And I was all drugged up. And my nerves were all burned out because, he was sayin all these mean things to me, that the baby wasn't his. Because the baby was white! And he was black. I remember throwin my little tray of water. I was so messed up and I was in

another world. I was hurting. And he was more concerned about the baby not bein his. He'd never showed any feelings. And I was over here dying!

I stayed a whole week in the hospital. Within two weeks, the baby was still in the incubator. He couldn't come out. I was so sad to see these other ladies having their babies, and I couldn't hold mine. Mine was a sick baby. And I was ready to get outta bed and walk. But I was so weak. I had lost a lotta blood. I had some complications myself. I didn't see no doctor til I was around eight months pregnant. And then I had dranked a lotta beer. I didn't take no more drugs.

And, well, after that, this man cools down. Finally somebody explains to him that I'm not black. The baby, all babies, come out white. He just didn't understand any of that. And I got to go into the nursery, put on all this weird stuff, to hold the baby. I couldn't breast-feed him, but I did give him the bottle. And we took a lot of pictures of that. I don't know what happened to them pictures. I had a big ol' suitcase and we stored all our stuff, what was left of it, and I don't have the pictures; I don't have the birth certificates.

We were separated at the time, and my mother said, "Well, you have to get in there and do somethin. Who's goin to pay for this baby?" At the time, we were so mad at each other, I told him that as soon as the baby was born, he could have it. Then I went ahead and tied my tubes. I gave it all up, because I didn't want this to happen to me anymore. And when I saw that little baby in there, I prayed as hard as I have ever prayed in my life, and I told God, "please, give him to me and I'll take care of him." But I want you to take that man away from me. I cannot bear to be with that man no more; just do that for me. I promise to take care of this little boy.

It was like I was under his control. It was like a voodoo spell. I lost respect for myself. I lost my pride. I lost my courage. I mean, when this man tol' me to jump, I had to say, "How, high, baby? How high." I prayed and I prayed to God that day I seen that baby sick. And we lived together because of the baby. I slowed down. I did what he wanted me to do. I knew at the time I had responsibilities. I had my three-year-old and I had the baby. So I slowed down. I stayed home. I cleaned house. I cooked. I was a mother and he was out doin his thing.

Well, the violence stopped. After he saw that baby I guess that changed him. It's his baby. And he changed! He was the father. He was more concerned. When he would leave town, he would make sure we had everything. And make sure that somebody would be outside watchin the doors. He had all his friends watchin me. Guardin me. I was controlled by him. I tried to get along with him the best way I could. 'Cause I knew he wasn't ever goin to leave me alone. I enjoyed having sex with him. I don't know why, but I did! He gave me everything. I knew it was all wrong, but he gave me everything. And I felt loved.

Then the next two months, we got caught. They raided us in the street. They had him set up. He trusted this black lady, and this black lady set him up. I was there. I was there with three thousand dollars in my purse. We were goin to Dallas. In my younger years, I've had a bad drinkin problem. And, every weekend, I would walk home drunk and the policemen would pick me up for intoxication. Throw me into jail. They'd love my hundred dollars, let me tell you! They let you sleep it out. And I was like one of their regulars. They knew when [I] was goin to come by.

[But this was] very different. I had committed a felony. I was in there for possession of cocaine. I stayed there two weeks. We all had a fifty thousand dollar bond on us. And he had a million bond on him. They made a deal. He gave 'em the money. And he cleaned my record. But really mostly they wanted him. They didn't want us. And I got a clean record after that. I lost a lotta weight. I didn't really worry about my kids, because my momma had 'em. And I would pray. I knew God was with me. I didn't eat. I was worried. I was very worried. All these detectives were comin here, and at the time, my hair was, a frosted color. All white. And them people would look at me, and they would tell me, "What has this man done to you?" And I wouldn't answer any questions. I didn't know what to say.

I didn't help him and I didn't tell on him either. We were hollerin at each other through the cells. And then, they moved him into solitary where he was by himself. And I was with all these ladies watchin myself on TV. I mean, after they freed me I just walked outta there. But it took two weeks! They were watchin me. He pawned all his gold jewelry. He got out. He went back in. They persuaded the bondsman to drop the bond. They took him back to jail. He would call me every day. I was livin in a little one bedroom apartment because my mother couldn't handle it. My mother couldn't have the police all over us any more. I

went and found this little place. Well, one a' his Cuban friends found me and the baby, a one room place. With one little bathroom. It was in a bad neighborhood, but I had to do something. He had some money stashed away. And I paid and I took care of my kids with that.

Then I came down here to Key West. Without any money...I had no choice. I knew I was gonna leave my momma. It took a lot. Everybody knew me. Everybody tried to take advantage of me. Men. Women. Whatever. I couldn't go to the store without anybody whispering behind my back. And my mother used to always tell me, "One day it's gonna end. But you better enjoy it while you can, 'cause you'll never go down this road again."

I felt like a queen. I felt nobody in the world ever gave me what I had always dreamed as a child. A waterbed. A dishwasher. A maid! Dances every Saturday, Friday. I knew it was wrong. I knew it. And now, I think I really felt somethin for that man, if this man would'a been different. I know this man would'a had been my perfect man, if he would'a lived honest. I wouldn't have worried about his color, how ugly he was, how hateful he was. 'Cause there were some times that he showed a lotta affection. But he hid it. I don't know why, but he hid it all the time. I'd panic inside, but I couldn't let it show. I had to be normal. Hard. And me being look havin the face of an innocent person, and talkin English. That was one of the best ways he took advantage of me. She's got it. She'll git me through.

I was by his side. And we fell together. He told them, "She don't know nothin. Let her go. I'll take the rap." And he told me "I did it because of that baby." There was a rumor he had two [children]. And just this last year, he left one little boy. He never talked about his past life. I never knew him as, like when two adults are married, they talk about how they were raised, how they grow up? I never had that with him. He was very silent about that. And the only time I asked him, "Have you ever been in jail in Cuba?" He say, "Yeah, I went to prison." So he had all of these scars and he looked like a man that really has suffered a lotta beatins. Like he was a slave.

With Claudio, [my daughter's father] it was very normal. He worked for us. I mean, we might had to 'a lived off twenty dollars worth of groceries every week. But we were happy. I had moved away from my momma and daddy's house because I was working. I have another child. And I

felt they were takin advantage of me. I was twenty-one years old and I walked out. They didn't throw me out this time. I walked out. And I went and stayed with, my mother's sister-in-law. I went and lived with her. She was on welfare and she had kids. And I had my job. I was workin as a waitress.

Claudio saw me waitressing. And he used to go to the house where I was stayin at, and mess around with the kids over there. He smoked pot. And I guess he was sellin joints to these little kids, at the time. Which was very natural back then. He called me up! And I didn't know who it was! I went to school with his wife, the one that he was separated from. And they were married for about three years. 'Cause they have two children. He picked me up and later on, about a month, I was already living with him! But we had a real nice relationship together. He was real good to me. And my mother and daddy hated him. 'Cause his sisters were lesbians. And they thought he was gay. We lived a whole year together 'til my baby girl was born on Easter Sunday.

[I] felt like the second woman. Because this first [wife] would just go up there and be messin with him, "Gimme some money; gimme some money", "Claudio, Jr. don't have no Pampers". And here I am with a big belly. It wasn't planned! It just happened! I know that I hadn't gone back to getting any of my birth control pills, and I took my chances, and that really blew it. But I was happy. I was very happy. He was a good man to me. He never hit me or anything like that.

And then later on down the line, Melissa was born. We had our own little house. He loved Melissa. That was his baby doll. That's her nickname, "Baby Doll". And, we lived three years together. Happy. No problems. And in the summer of 'eighty-five, he changed! I guess because we all started drinkin, started smokin pot and stuff, more than normally we had. We were behind our bills. We had nothin to eat, we were bummin off a my sister. And well, he started gambling.

He was a pool-hall hustler. And he never took me out. He would always take me to his mother's house. I respected that lady, 'cause she was in a wheelchair. And his mother would put me to do things. And then he would sneak off the back door and I wouldn't see him till late, late at night. And then we would start arguing. I found out that he was goin out on me! With his sister-in-law! When I found that out, I lost it. I broke all his windows, from the car. I stabbed him in the hand. I got some blood out of him. I

wanted him to know that he had hurt me. He disappeared from town for five days. Later on, I found out he was with that same lady. And I stayed with his mother. I tol' her, "This is his responsibility. My mother doesn't want me over there at her house." And I cannot stay with my sister, 'cause she's got her family. So I stayed there with her. And he never came around. Never. My mother and daddy started helping me.

He hurt me. And then I started goin out on him. I started stayin out late. I started doin a whole bunch'a stuff. And I got even with him by goin to bed with his cousin. He found out. I wanted him to find out. We lost our little house. The man kicked us out. I packed all a' my stuff. He had already took all his. And all I took was my pictures. My pictures and my baby's clothes, too. I went with my sister. And I didn't work. We were sort'a livin off of her income. We smoked the same cigarettes. We all ate what she had. Her husband is a farmer. And they got two kids. But they were havin problems, 'cause my sister also had a drinking problem. And she liked to go out every night! And this man was good to her! He, let her go out. He trusted her. I was always in that little group, myself.

My [other] son, Thomas. I had never raised him. My mother and father took him from me when he was eight months old. And that was because I was bein wild in the streets. I worked. And I gave them half of my paycheck, and I kept half. And I'd spend it all on my friends, drinkin beer. Livin it up! Goin to jail every weekend. I didn't really raise my first-born. My mother made sure a' that because of the way she saw I was headin.

I was in [high] school when I met Thomas' daddy. My mother and daddy were always fighting. They just gave up. And that was because of a very special death that happened--my grampaw. Everything started changin because my daddy always drank. He left his work. He would always have us to call for him, that he was sick, when he wasn't sick; he was drunk. Too drunk to go to work. Too drunk to go call up. And he'd send us. And we started not caring. Nobody didn't care.

So we just started skipping school, bringing bad grades home. I ran away. I turned sixteen. I was still in school. And then we met these people from Oklahoma City. Okies, they call 'em. And his name was S. J. He was a white guy. Very ugly. At that time, I couldn't have no boyfriends. So we started sneakin around! I was a virgin at

the time. I was workin at the carhop as a waitress. And then half of the days I'd go to school. My daddy finally sat me down. He said, "You either go to school, quit school, or go to work." So I did both. I got me a little part-time job at night.

And one night, S.J. went and picked me up from work. And I found myself in the back of the Sonic, makin love to this man. On the ground. I lost all my, childhood there. After that happened, I was scared. Then, later on, we had already done it once. We started doin it again. My mother and daddy started givin us privileges. We would take off to the movies. You had to be at the movies and be home at a certain time. But we never went to the movies! We were out messin around. And it got me in trouble.

I winded up pregnant. And I had to go and get married. My daddy was furious. My daddy could'a killed me that day. Oh, god. So, to keep our reputation goin, I had to marry him. And his father went and spoke to my mother and my father, and [said] "We'll take care of her; we'll give her a good education; we'll let her finish school." [But] he was a drunk, too. They all lived off'a welfare. They were on food stamps. And I was so young at that time, it didn't matter. He didn't even work!

[We lived] with his parents. They moved to Oklahoma City. They were already in trouble in Texas because one of the sons had broken into a western store and stole boots and hats and stuff, and tried to sell 'em in a li'l town that everybody knows [everybody]. The police ordered them outta town. And I had to go along with 'em 'cause I was married to S. I stayed there a whole month. I was pregnant. Like I said, he never worked in his life. He would always leave me there with his mother. And take off with his daddy to the bars. He'd come drunk and he would beat on me. That was the first time a man had ever hit me. And I called Mom. "Send me up some money so I can come home."

So, my mother sent me the money. I had to sneak away from there. I got away from him. I winded back in Texas with my parents. And, oh, god, with my parents, again! I was just a baby myself. But they took care of me. My parents were very concerned. Well, it was the first baby in the family. About three months later, S. came back to Texas looking for me. And my mother called the cops on him and told him, "You don't have no baby here." They wanted to erase what had happened. They wanted to erase him outta my life. And me too! I knew I had made a mistake. And I

straightened up. But my mother and daddy had financial problems. They could not afford the hospital or anything.

So they sent me to my aunt. She was a very middle-class person that had money, had kids of her own. But she was very wealthy and I went and stayed with them in October. I was pregnant. I had a big belly. I was in my last term. I gave birth to my first boy. And then two days after I got outta the hospital, my daddy was already waiting for me to go back. He went down there, and got me! I lived there with my parents 'til the baby was eight months old. And then I didn't like what was goin on in our house, that my parents wanted me to do this, and do that, and "Now you got a responsibility; you got to take care of this kid." I was under their control. I had to do everything all over again.

I was lost. I was married. I didn't know what was goin on. Why did this happen to me? What was gonna happen to me in the future? I was just makin four-fifty [dollars]. I couldn't live off'a that. That was teenager money, then. I couldn't afford no Pampers. I couldn't afford no milk. My parents helped me with it. And they took me to get assistance for him. I got a little check for the baby, which was a hundred dollars a month. And when I left home, my mother was still gettin that assistant. All I did was just sign that check, and cash it for 'em to take care of the baby. Until my daddy moved away. I lived like that for two years.

And then somewhere along the line I met Claudio. They kicked me out of the house. They kept my son as a revenge, I guess. They kept sayin, "You're gonna come back." I was determined not to come back. I wanted to stay away from 'em as much as I could. They wouldn't let me get my own place. "You can't make it with this baby afford my little ol' apartment by myself, but they never gave me that chance.

I was born in Texas. My daddy was workin as a constructor. They built buildings. And my mother was a housewife. She took care of us. And it was normal. [There were] six of us. And we were all a year or two apart. We all were little together. I remember the snow. I remember us Easter-egg hunting. I remember when we used to go to school. I remember our Christmases when we believed in Santa Claus. We lived good. We lived in a three-bedroom house. Me and my sister shared a room. The baby was with my mom and dad. My mother and daddy were happy, very happy. We were just an ordinary family. I mean, my daddy drank, but

not heavy. They'd go out. They'd come back happy. I had a real nice childhood, that I can remember.

I remember one time my mother was pregnant. She sent me to get two Dr. Peppers. And the store was just like around the corner. And there I go, walkin to get these two Dr. Peppers. And right on the corner, there was this homeless man, he was a drunk. He grabbed me by my arm. And tol' me, "Come on". And I remember yelling, "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" And here comes my mother with this big belly, with a bat, in her hand. And this man let go of me. He was tryin to take me somewhere! I was about nine, ten years old, when that happened to me. And all I can remember my mother holdin me, and tellin me that it was gonna be okay. I still remembered that.

I lived in an old part of the neighborhood where there were people in the streets and drunks and sirens every night. We had a big ol' backyard that was all blocked with a fence. I also remember goin to see my grandmother. We used to call her "the apple lady". When I was around four or five I can still remember her takin us apples. And the last time I saw my grandmother, she was in a coffin, in a pink dress. It was snowing. And I remember us gettin in this little ol' green little truck that my daddy had. I still remember seeing this lady in a pink dress. My grandmother died of throat cancer.

I remember my mother and daddy started having problems. My daddy started drinking heavily. He was always goin out on her. He would always tell us, "Get the kids ready. We're gonna go eat hamburgers." On Fridays, when he would get paid. We wouldn't see my daddy in two weeks. And he'd leave us there, sittin there, waitin for him to come pick us up to go to McDonalds to eat a hamburger. That was our family treat. That was our family gatherings.

I remember then we would go and get some Kentucky Fried Chicken and go to the parks and have picnics. It was just a li'l ol' bucket a' chicken with bread and a Coke. But we were happy. My mother, with the death of her mother, I guess she locked herself from us. She was a mother. She was there. She always had the house clean. She always had our clothes clean. But she wasn't there. I had never seen that until I realized the problems. And my daddy was a drunk. He wasn't never home.

Money was there. When he had nothin to eat, we had, a little credit to go get baloney and bread. We mostly lived

off'a baloney and bread. One night, my mother was in there making tortillas. Everybody was asleep, and she called me in there, and sat me down. And she told me, "I'm leaving. But I'm coming back for you." I was eight years old. [She said] "You're in charge now." She made us a big ol' stack a' tortillas, a big ol' pot of beans, that's what Mexicans eat. Tortillas and beans!

She was runnin away from my daddy. Because my daddy was goin out on her. I guess she couldn't hack it. She had to get away. She had to leave. Her aunt and uncle took her. They knew how my daddy was treating my mother. One night, before this incident happened, I woke up and they had just came in from a dance. And my mother was crying. And my daddy was tellin her stuff. I remember seeing blood comin outta my mother's nose. And she was tryin to wash it off so I couldn't see it. And my daddy walked into the living room and passed out on the couch. And my mother was cleanin her face. And she grabbed me by my arm and we'd go and lay down on her bed. And I would lay by her. And I could hear her weepin. But I didn't know what was goin on at the time. I didn't never see my daddy pick up his arm at my mom.

[My brothers and sisters] were wild, mean children! They were just satisfied if they eat. They were satisfied if they'd play. I was the only one with sense at the time, I think! But one night she called me over to the table, and we sat there. My daddy wasn't home. And we were all used to my daddy not bein home. We knew he was around the bar, drinkin up all the money. And she told me, with tears in her eyes, "I'm leaving, and you're in charge. You've gotta take care of K. You gotta take care of F. You've gotta take care of M. And you've gotta take care of B." Which was the baby.

[She left] the next morning. I thought she was just kidding. She had her little suitcase and her hat in her hand. And we all started cryin. We didn't think this was gonna happen! There were times that she would get mad at my father and say, "No". Then the next day she would wake up okay, and she wouldn't think about it any more. I thought that was gonna happen. She was cryin and we were all holdin her and tellin her "Why?" We didn't know what was goin on! She goes, "Remember what I told you. Stay inside and lock the door. Don't be outside. If you wanna eat, there's somethin to eat." We stood on the porch and watched this lady get in a cab and take off.

I knew I was in charge. But she had already left word with the rent lady. And she I guess, more or less knew what was goin on. 'Cause I didn't. I didn't see my daddy, God, in two or three weeks. Because after that, he went and got my grandmother, his mother, to go get us outta the house and take us to her house. Now that lady treated us like dirt. We all slept in a garage. Here she has this beautiful home, and she owned a bar. And we all had cots in the garage! She didn't like my ma. I never knew about my mother's past. But I know that she hated my mom and she hated [my dad] too! She felt like we were a burden to her. She locked us up in a garage. I don't really know how long we lived like that, but I remember that we got tired of it. And we broke one of the windows to the garage, and we unlocked the garage, and we walked home.

We crossed this big highway. All of us. And I don't remember walkin on the highway, but I remember my aunt tellin us, "How did y'all cross that big highway?" We all hold hands and we got home. The house was still there. And then they went and got my daddy. And my daddy stayed home. He turned the TV on and we all laid there like nothin had happened! He laid there and conked out, and we all laid around him.

God, I let it go on. I lived day by day. And I remember not never cryin for my mother. I didn't cry for my mother. I felt like a normal kid. I was just eight years old. I didn't know what was goin on! I don't even remember goin to school. I remember my daddy takin his brother and this white-headed lookin lady, she was nasty looking, to the house and they slept in my momma's bed. I remember that. After my momma had gone. And my daddy snuck her out like he wanted to make sure nobody saw. But I saw. And I never told anybody. Not even my mother.

I remember the welfare lady was at the door. The welfare lady wanted us, and my daddy said, "No." That night, we found ourselves hitch-hiking. All of us. My daddy's brother, had this car. We were all in this ol' car. And it broke down. [It was a] six hour drive. But we hitch-hiked. We were little! He found where my mother was at. And then we found ourselves walkin and I remember my little brother saying, "I'm thirsty. Where're we goin?" He said, "We're goin for your momma's house." I remember shivering, being scared. Then the a big ol' truck picked us up. He was a good man. He bought us all a hamburger. My daddy'd sit in the front and he had a little cot back there, and we were all bunked up in there. I remember gittin off, and in a

corner, and we shook the man's hand and we were all bare-footed, all dirty. It was the summertime, 'cause it was hot. I turned around and I saw my momma comin runnin. I cried. She must [have known we were coming], because she was there.

[After that] We lived in a farm. And we were city kids. We killed chickens; we didn't know that them people had to live off of them chickens. They had to get their eggs for their breakfast and stuff. And we used to get bad whippins, too. We were wild. We were a bunch of city kids, goin into a strange land, a strange world, of farming. It was one of my mother's uncle's farm that let us stay there a couple of times. I remember us goin to bed, and the next thing I know, my momma and daddy were happy and they were tryin to find us a home. [We were starting] all over again.

We got a home. We didn't have no light. We didn't have no beds. We didn't have nothin. We slept on the floor. My daddy was working at a rest home until [it] went outta business. I attended school there. I started in the fourth grade. [T]here's just parts of it that's blocked away. I remember the bad things, mostly. I remember bad things of my childhood. I remember the good, too. We got our lives back together again. We were happy. We were normal kids.

But, when we were livin out on that farm, one day we were in the front, and [our cousins] said, "Look, here comes your grampa. That's your grampa!" What did I do? I go and stand in the middle of the street, and wave this old man down in this old ragged green truck. And he's honking, mad! "Git that kid outta the street!" in Spanish, I could hear him say and he drove off mad! I guess they knew him. But I didn't know him!

Then I remember all of us bein in my mother's uncle's house, and my mother was crying, on her knees and beggin to this ol' man. "Forgive me, forgive me", "I'm your daughter; forgive me." I didn't know what was goin on; they would always put us in a separate room where we couldn't hear anything. Or throw us outside. Next thing I know, my mother's sittin on this ol' man's lap. And she got me. She goes, "Come here." "This is your grampa." And he said, "Are you the one that was in the middle of the street, wavin me down?" And I said, "Yes." And he got me and hugged me! And I turned out to be his special little girl! I was his pride and joy!

He took us fishin. He got a part of me, and I felt a part of him as I was growin up bigger. He was like a

father to me, because my father was always workin. I remember one time we took a drive. I went up his porch in the truck, but he didn't get mad at me. My daddy was furious, but he didn't get mad at me. I broke down his whole porch. He was showin me how to drive, at the time! And I step on the gas, and the truck went up on the porch! He died in November. They found him dead behind his farm. He had a heart attack. I was thirteen. I remember seeing, I remember touching. He took my first communion cross with him. He gave me so much happiness. I was his special girl.

I didn't know I had a grampa. I didn't even know what a grampa was. My mother would talk about some of her past to me. My grampa would beat on my grandmother a lot. They had to separate. So my mother was sorta like an [only] child. And my mother's brother, he was the bad one. He went to prison when he was fifteen years old. So I kinda imagine they had a real bad life. Just the two children. There was some hurtin in there.

[I]t was my mother. She changed. She started havin mental problems. She started seein a psychiatrist. I wish I coulda been six, when she used to hold me and tell me she loved me. She used to tickle my feet. Brush my hair. I didn't have that anymore, when I was thirteen. We all had chores to do. Every day we knew what to do. Same old thing. We never got to go out anywhere anymore. Everything changed. My father started drinkin beer again. He started hittin that heavy stuff. Whisky. He was always in black town, and there we'd go and try to find my daddy, because he would drink and drive. And we would bring my him home. I knew how to drive, then, and my daddy was so intoxicated, he couldn't even stand up. And my mother would be layin in bed, asleep. All drugged up. Because she used to have all these pills. It just closed in some ways, the relationship in that house.

I mean, we felt abandoned. I felt abandoned. I started stayin out at night and then comin home and gettin hit hard. Then next day, goin and doin it again! Well. "It's gonna hurt a little while." That kinda attitude. [I stayed out late at night] not to be home. I was so unhappy. I knew there was a shoe waitin for me in the house or broom or whatever. I started skipping school. I can remember my momma saying, "Why are you doing this?" and crying. "You're not happy?". But I couldn't say that. I couldn't say anything like that in school. Because we were taught, whatever goes in our house, stays in our house.

I found myself with this little bag of clothes. I wrapped up a towel with a pair of shorts, a shirt, a pair a' underwear. And I found myself runnin away from home! But that was because my friend from school was gonna run away with her boyfriend. And we had a big fantasy that we were just gonna move away and I was gonna be the maid, and I was gonna take care a' them. I packed my stuff, and I left with them. I knew it was wrong. We went to a little town in Texas. Somewhere along the line, we separated. I was by myself. But we had plans to walk the w-h-o-l-e railroad track! To the end. And they would be there waitin for us! Along the way, we would meet each other. But it was gonna have to be down that railroad track.

I found myself in under this fence. And two cops came. I ran! And I jumped this fence and my jacket got caught to the barbed wire. I guess they already knew that I was a runaway. I guess they had already reported me. I was gone two days, maybe three. I stayed in jail because when your parents put a warrant out for you, you gotta go see a juvenile officer. I did it 'cause [my friends] did it. I just did it. We never had good clothes. We always had torn tennis shoes. People would make fun of us. I was too young to feel, or to understand what that meant.

They brought [me back home.] I straightened up. I went back to school. [Then] My sister ran off! But my sister stayed gone three months! This ol' lady had her prostituting. I remember us puttin out posters, lookin for her. My parents blamed me. "If you would'a not showed her the way, she wouldn't a' never done it!" And that's when she met her husband, that she lived with her husband six years. They have two children. He was a migrant. He picked oranges for a living. They never settled down in one place. But he was a good man.

My daddy slowed down drinkin cause he started workin as a flagman, for the city. He worked like that for four years. Oh, we had a washing machine. We were eating good. We had a nice home. We were big already. We were knowing life. And, my sister was the one that would mess up. I was more into school. She was slow. She wasn't retarded, but she was s-l-o-w! I remember one time she came in and my daddy punched her and punched her against the washing machine until he she dropped. For staying out late.

We're all scattered [now]. D.'s in Kansas. I got a brother here, but we don't get along. My sister's in West Palm Beach. M.'s in Texas. He's the only one that stayed.

He's a mechanic. He never finished school. He's shackin up with our [high school mascot]. And she come from a wealthy family; he's got a drinking problem. B., and my oldest brother, G. we call him "fat man" they're in [another part of Texas]. B. just turned eighteen. And he's married already. He's got a little girl. D.'s is trying to get scholarships. His dream is to be a coach. I haven't seen D., in about nine years. We think he's gay cause he sends people these pictures of guys all the time. And he's always with guys. But he has that look of a gay person. Nobody knows what he does. My mom now has my son and the [youngest brother.] [The family is not close.] Not at all.

My father lives in Texas. He's married. He's got a paper that says he's married to this lady from Mexico. I hadn't seen my daddy in four or five years. He gathers junk and sells it at the flea markets. He picks cans. [My parents had been together twenty-six years.] Never married. In Texas, it's common law. He left my momma on the streets. [With] Nothing! Nothing. She went with some family. And they picked up the pieces from there. She got on welfare. They found her a trailer. And my daddy would come around. And she was this teenager all over again. My daddy would stay a night, and then leave. They would fight the next day, and then he'd leave. And then my mother got involved with that Cuban.

It seems that she's not happy. She don't want nobody to be happy. That's the way I feel. That's the way she makes me feel. In some sort, she envied me when I was with the candyman because she would get the impression that when she needed something, she couldn't talk to me. If she could'a just at least tol' me, "I don't have no bread. I don't have nothing. Help me." I would'a done it. But she didn't have to make faces at me, or not come around any more or just close the doors at me. Here I was, having all these problems with this Cuban man and, then havin her not helpin me. But she wanted a lotta help from me. But she never could tell me, "Help me." No, she thought, "No, you have everything. You're happy." "You eat in fancy restaurants. You dress good."

I always prayed. I'd pray. And give somethin up. Make promises. And it's set in a Bible, when you make a promise, you have to keep it. Think I relied more on God to help us and to make the pain go away. Whatever the situation was. [My parents helped me sometimes] but then, I had to pay for it when I got home, because I knew it wasn't goin to be the same. No, "because we had to send you this money, we don't

have this! We don't have that! Now what we gonna do?" And that would get me down. That would make me feel like I was a burden. I made my bed, I should'a stayed in it. I knew it was my fault, but they didn't have to throw it at me every day. I even started working. I started givin them all my money. Just to keep 'em happy!

And now that we're all scattered, and don't have nobody to depend on it makes it easier. 'Cause we really have to grow up. And really see life as it really is. They should'a let us seen it in my teenage years. I don't think my mother and daddy ever put an [example] for us to the right road, or to the wrong road. They were so bottled up in their problems, now that I look at it. They depended on us to do right all the time. But then they weren't doin right, either. [My mother] told me that I was gonna be a nun. A nun. That was her goal. I didn't even know what a nun was! A nun don't have no kind of privileges. I said, "That's what my momma wanted me to be?"

At the time, I wanted to be a nurse. I used to always fantasize with my dolls, get the pencil and poke at 'em like I was givin 'em shots and stuff. I remember wanting to be Cher! Have all this long beautiful hair, singing. Karen Carpenter was my favorite. And I always wanted to be like her. 'Cause she sang beautiful songs. The Beatles, I was in love with Ringo Starr. And to top it off to I had a boyfriend named Ringo! But it was a nice and sweet, honest relationship. I mean, we used to hold hands. He would kiss me on my cheek and I would die. [There] were some good years.

But I know the liquor, it's an inherent thing that we'll have. It's inherited. My mother used to not drink. But now? Whoo! I remember my mother and daddy used to pass three cases a night. Between the two of them or whoever came and visit and bought it. Three cases.

When did I take my first swallow? With my parents. At seventeen. 'Cause I never drank [before that.] I drank milk. And my cherry pie! And my pig feet! My pickled pig feet! But when I was seventeen on down. I mean, I was drinking whiskey out of a bottle. Buy a bottle, a bunch of people, make drinks...Drinkin is in my family, was like a vitamin you had to have every day. It was a supplement that just had to be there! When [my daughter] was smaller I'd wake up with a beer bottle in my hand, and go to bed with a beer bottle in my hand. But I took care of my baby. I mean, everything was always neat. I'll go and buy a six-pack.

That six-pack lasts me until I hit the bed. But my house is clean. I spend time with my kids. That's the way I've always [been.]

I went to drinkin and knew that it was too bad for me, I started sniffing paint. Acrylics--[to inhale from the mouth.]

Acrylics was a buzz that I liked going to. And it ruined my eye. I have one eye smaller than the other. So I had to give that up. When I was seventeen, eighteen years old. My wild life, bein in the streets. I can remember one time I had it in a 7-up can. I was freaked out so much that I thought I was drinkin 7-up and I drank paint! And then when it messed up my eye, I knew it was time to quit, because my mother said, "Girl, you gonna go blind".

You hear a "hzzzzz". And laughing. Constantly laughin. It's not like being drunk. You just sit there and space out. You're not up and down, anywhere. [It's] similar [to being high.] Just a buzz. And that when I was doin that, I was at home. I would sneak my paint up to my room. And I'd spray it and over there by the window, there was these munchkins, dancin, all beautiful colors! And I was dancin, by myself! My daddy opened the door and turned on the light and he just looked at me and he said, "What are you doing?" And he saw the spray paint, so he knew. He goes, "If I see that in my house again, you're out." So what did I do? I waited till I got off'a work and I'd sit in a vacant house or something and sniff my paint! But I never drank beer. I was more into that sniffing stuff. Those were those were some times, God.

I got to Key West with, three guys that [worked for] the candyman. So we headed down this'a way. And they had a little house over here. They had their jobs here. And I have my brother here. Later, I moved in with my brother, because they were havin a whole bunch 'a problems at the [house] with me there. Me bein a woman in there, my two kids. [It] started gittin very--nasty. And I tol' my brother about my situation and I was waiting to get help from the welfare. I was gittin ninety-eight dollars, food stamps, for my kids. I didn't have nothin. Nothin. I'm depending on these guys, and, it's sort of like they were making me feel that all of 'em owned me. I had to pay back some way. Sexually. Harassment. Which, got very discouraged for me. And I had to get out.

I was alone. I stayed drunk practically every day. Not to even think about what I was goin through. And I cried.

There were times I didn't come outta that little room. I kept me and my kids in that room. Just the three of us. I moved in with my brother. And it was still like a heart attack, because he wanted to control me, too. My kids couldn't make noise; my kids couldn't do this and that. And I lived like that for almost a year and a half. Him and his wife.

They have a baby. And we all lived in a one bedroom apartment. The kids slept on the couch, and they had a little mattress that they would throw down for me. Almost a year and a half. Off and on.

I would clean up for 'em. I would wash their clothes for 'em. But I felt trapped, like I was sorta like a maid there. I mean, they never did tell me I couldn't go out and walk or anything. I had my freedom. But I just didn't know how to use it. I'd take my kids to the park. Git away from them guys. And I started gettin my checks there. And my brother said, "Well, you have to get out; you need to find your own place". And me and my brother hardly didn't never get along. [But] I didn't have the cops watchin me every day. That was somethin new for me. I had my freedom. I didn't have to listen to anybody. I had to listen to myself, but I didn't know at the time how to listen to myself.

I had lost a lot. And I had to be born again to start all over again. It was a weird feelin. I caint explain how I felt. Lost. Sad. And I missed my mother so much. I had never been so far away from her. Even though we didn't get along, I didn't have her there. I couldn't run to her when the baby got sick or the baby didn't have any milk, stuff like that. And [my] little girl just tagged along. She never was sad and I never did see unhappiness in her. She was just a kid, I guess. She didn't know what was goin on. She asked me, "Where was her poppy?" And I would tell her poppy was in jail. And that he couldn't be with us. She was just grateful she ate. Had her three meals a day. And she had her bath. And she had her times to play. Had her time for me to love her and she was satisfied.

But I hid a lot of it from her, 'cause I didn't want her to grow up emotionally knowin that somethin was always botherin me. Because as I look at myself today, my parents tried so hard to hide the worst days of their lives. But I was smart, and I knew that something was always wrong. I was just waiting for the candyman to come back. To git me out of it. I waited and I waited. But then in December of '87, [I went] to Texas to see my momma. And before we went

to see my momma, we went to prison to see the candyman. And when I saw him through them bars, and he saw my kids, he told me, "You can do better than that." 'Cause the kids didn't have good clothes on. Some of the clothes were clothes that that man had bought awhile back. And I just sat there like a dummy! I couldn't defend myself. I couldn't tell him what I was goin through.

All that kept goin through my head, "How do you know? You're in here and I'm out here." I couldn't say anything to him. I just sat there and let call me every name in the book. And I told him, that's one time I got up and told him, "I don't need nobody to try to change me." I said, "I'm a woman." And I felt like tellin him what them guys had tried to do to me and everything, but I couldn't 'cause I knew that he was gonna blame it on me. He told me that one of 'em had ten thousand dollars that he had left for me. I go, "Well, what ten thousand dollars?" I said, "If I knew I wouldn't'a lived there for so many months." He never gave me an opportunity to explain myself. All he kept sayin, "Are you still waiting for me? Are you still waiting for me?" In other words, have I gone to bed with anybody yet? I had when he got out, I had already committed myself to someone. And he promised me that he wouldn't hurt me anymore. And I lived day by day, believin that man, that it was true. That he wasn't goin to come back and hurt me or take my kids.

[I was living] with these guys here. And they had been watchin that house. I knew it. They were selling coke at that house. So this guy winds up in jail. There's nobody there to pay rent. So there I go. I get all my stuff and move to my brother's house. At the time, Jesus [my boyfriend] would find me a whole bunch'a times in the beaches, around twelve, one o'clock at night. Askin me, "Well, what are you doin?" I say, "I'm just out here." Alone. With my kids. And he would ask me, well, "You can trust me. Tell me what's bothering you." And he already knew us. I've known Jesus for eight years. From Texas. He's got his family there in Texas, also. And he hung around with the gang, but he never did, not that I know of, any bad drugs or anything like that.

He was more like an old-fashioned guy. He believed more in workin and takin care of eatin every day. We would sit there, and I would just cry to the man. He knew somethin was wrong and he would try to get my faith, try to git me to believe that he would understand me and that he would try to help me. And I told him I didn't need nobody's

help. I did tell him what was goin on in that house. They would just bother me. They would put their arms around me. They would talk about helping me, taking care of my kids. All this flaky stuff. And I knew it was just for one thing. But I had more respect for myself. I knew if I let myself go one time, I would be trash. And besides, I'm the kinda person that I have to love someone in order to give my body away. Then my brother, he couldn't do anything for me. I didn't never blame him. He just couldn't help me. He was just startin off himself.

[I]t was very hard when I came to Key West. But in four months, I picked up. I got my first check. I helped my brother pay all his bills, 'cause he was behind. I bought my first washer, which was twenty-five dollars. I put [my daughter] into the pre-school. We started pickin up. And then along the way I started gittin stronger. I started thinkin to myself, "If you don't do it, nobody's goin to do it for you." I couldn't turn around and there would be my momma.

[Before] I didn't have no pride. I didn't have no mind. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I felt that I had to have somebody control my life. And when that man told them guys to bring me down here, that was it. They brought me down here. I turned myself around. I kept sayin that I didn't want nobody's help. I made myself hard and I brought myself back to the world. I opened up and I saw things different. With a little help from my brother, tellin me, "You have to let it go. You have to start doin something for yourself and them kids or they'll take the kids away from you." I panic when somebody says that to me.

I guess the kids really were the ones that brought me back. [My daughter] was growin up. She was a li'l wild girl. She had to get some kinda education in her. She had just turned five, and I found out that if the kids weren't put in school, you'll get put in jail. So that's what mostly got me goin. I had to do it. I had never sat and thought about that. I just let days go on and cry. That's all I'd do. Cry. Self pity. I cried a whole year. And drinkin. Not outta control. I was very controlled. But I just needed somethin to knock me out. I know I would get drunk, and pass out. That's what I liked. Not knowin what went on. It was very sad. Then I just picked myself up. I don't know how, but I picked myself up!

Well, my case worker was a very nice lady. And I just opened up to her. And I told her I didn't have nothin here.

And that I didn't like to be movin off, up and down. And that I needed to change my life. And she asked me, "Well, do you need some kind'a counseling or something?" "Do you have a problem?" I go, "Yeah, I have a problem. I don't have nowhere to go." "I was brought here like a gigolo. " And I've been a gigolo, just sittin here waitin for y'all to help me. And she wanted to know basically if I was married and stuff like that. And I explained to her that I hadn't been married, that I was divorced but that my mother had my first child. I got into more deeper with what was goin on with my little boy's father. And that he had threatened to kill me.

And she signed me up for housing. I started gettin my food stamps. I started adjusting, and buying stuff to last me a whole month, because I knew that I didn't have no other source of income. I started buying my kids' shoes at the store, but I would go and get cheap clothes at the Starvation Army. And I started pickin up like that. And my kids were very smart, and they didn't eat very much.

[When the candyman got out of jail, he] came to Key West. [H]e started tellin me that he wanted my baby and I froze and I tol' him, "No, you cannot have this baby." And my mother had already warned me. She told me, "If you need to come home, you come home." And every time I would hear her say, "Write me, and tell me" if I needed to come home. I kept growin farther and farther away, 'cause I knew I could never go back home. I knew it. And she knew it, too.

[H]e had tol' her that he had changed, that he was a different man. He wanted to pick up from scratch. And when I saw him, I couldn't even look at him. He wanted to put his arms around me and I couldn't. I stood up to him, and I tol' him, "It's over." He didn't say nothin else. I guess he knew. He said, "Well, I'm takin the child". I said, "No, you're not. This baby's under government property. You cannot take this child." I ran to the neighbor's home, with him in my arm. And I called the police. And I told the neighbor to please shut the door. He kept bangin on that door, and that poor lady was scared. She didn't know what was goin on.

'Bout five minutes later, here comes the police. I had the baby and I was cryin. And I tol' him this man just got out of prison and he's on parole and he does not have any business here in Key West. And it was a Spanish man, so he talked to him in Spanish. And he was tellin him, "No, my son, my son, my son". I was just hopin that they would

check his record, but they didn't do it. [H]e was on parole. He left from Texas. And when you're on parole, you're not supposed to leave the state. I wanted them to check his background. But they didn't do it. That's the first time ever I've ever called the cops. He went away. He left. I didn't see him for about three more months.

And the second time he came, he said he was gonna take the kids to Walt Disney World. And he started kissin on me, and I couldn't git him away from me. Later I found out that he was involved with another lady, and that lady was havin another child. My mother wrote me, and she told me, "You have to sit down and y'all gonna have to end this. Y'all are gonna have to get somethin straight. Y'all are not sufferin; them kids are." He says, "I'm takin the kids to Disney World." He takes 'em. I thought he was gonna take 'em and bring 'em back. But one of the guys that went with him to Disney World, Sunday night, I was sittin on the porch and here comes that guy with my daughter but not my baby! I lived a whole month 'a misery! He took him!

I couldn't [do anything], [go] nowhere! Nowhere! [This guy said] he was gonna bring the baby in one month. So I live a whole month 'a misery again. I didn't know whether to wait for my income and go to Texas. But that was the road he wanted me to do. He wanted me to go back to Texas. That was like a trap for me. He said, "Once I got her here, she caint leave." That's what he wanted to do to me. So I sweated it out. But my mother kept me in contact because she had the baby 'cause who else was gonna take care of it? He rode around all day. He didn't have nowhere to live! He lived in a cadillac. He didn't never have a home for us. He was selling dope again.

I went to legal services and to see what I could do so this wouldn't happen to me anymore. I explained to her and like always, the fathers have more rights. I tried to explain to her that he was not a good father. He was selling drugs. He was on parole. He didn't have a home. And then I was comin from the store, and he was comin in a bike, with the baby. And I just looked at him. And I grabbed my son. I didn't wanna hear nothin. I went inside the house, and I shut the door. And my brother told me, "He has some clothes for the baby" and I said, "Tell him to stick 'em up there, because I don't need 'em." My baby was chubby. He had all these little nigger-knots on him. And I tol' him my baby is not a nigger. My baby was well taken care of. Because I knew my momma would take care of him. And he was dressed very nice. Somethin I could never have

done. Candyman left Key West. I never heard from him again. Then later my mother told me that he was back in prison, doin seventy-eight years. He lost his rights as a resident alien. And they'll transport him back to Cuba. But now I'm so afraid now that we're ninety miles from Cuba.

I see it very differently. I have an open mind. I can use it. I have my freedom. I can dress the way I want. I can be a clean person. And not have the law on me for somethin that's not right. I'm different. I didn't have anything I didn't know anything about respect back then. I didn't even know what was love. I mean, what really love was. And now, I don't really care much less. I hold a relationship, but that's because I want to. I wanna feel what I didn't feel back then. And that's respect, companionship, and activities as a family. I'm not emotionally involved with anybody. I'm not in love. I mean, in love you kiss the man's feet. But I don't. My relationship now with a man is very different. And I like it! I'm satisfied! I'm very satisfied. And I don't think I would ever want to be married again. Never.

I'm a Catholic and I don't believe in [abortion]. Never. My first child, my mother and daddy were aiming to it. 'Cause I was young. But I think they sat down and said, "She wants to go through the hard life. Let's not take it from her 'cause one day, she's gonna regret it." I had never thought about abortion, never. I wanted to get pregnant with my daughter. But with [my oldest son and my baby] it was just like a big mistake. I would rather have 'em and put 'em up for adoptions, if I knew I couldn't take care of 'em. And I'm not never gonna be like that either, 'cause I tied 'em! I'm not gonna be a mother no more! I'm satisfied!

When I was in the third grade, I had a teacher named Miss S. And she was an ol' lady, but she was very strict. I was always wanting to be helpful. But I think she didn't like that. And I remember one time that I drew a rabbit. And I colored my little pink rabbit. And about a week later she comes up to me, and she made a ceramic of it. Oh, I felt so proud! And she told me, "This was the best one." And I was all happy. But when she tried to teach me math, I was always out of it. I didn't like to work with numbers that much. [I liked] Art, English, P.E., which was normal for a kid, runnin--up and down, doin exercise. And lunchtime. I just loved lunch! Being with my friends. When

I got up to the seventh grade, I graduated into the eighth grade. It was sorta like a celebration, startin junior high.

I remember my mother and daddy gittin the li'l old fashioned dresses. I had an orange one. It was old-timey but it was one of them casual-looking dresses. My sister's was green. My daddy took us to that little prom. And we just went there for the food! In fact, that's all I could remember. And everybody was dancin. And me and my sister didn't even know how to dance at the time. I was in the graduation, believe it or not. I had to open the ceremony with a prayer.

And at the time, we were goin to church. We were goin for our communion. And we went to bible schools and bible studies and such. And I remember the Father writin me a little prayer to say for the school. I caint remember it anymore, but I remember bein up there. In front of everybody! I had long black hair. My hair was very long. I mean, everything was normal 'til we got lice and my daddy chopped our hairs off. And that was so embarrassing, having to go to school bald-headed because of lice problems that were real bad.

I liked school. I wasn't the perfect student. I was a C-average student. My mother and daddy said, "You could do better than that." There'd be times I'd really get into it. And then there would be days that I would just doze off, to my little world. But I enjoyed school, while I was there.

Well, as a Mexican-American, I wasn't popular. Mostly all my friends I had were black. I never socialized with white people because they had more money, it was into that thing, "No, don't hang around with so-and-so; they're poor", you know. [The school was] mostly white. I was raised with white kids. I mean, there was parts of Mexican, parts white, and, all blacks on one side. But I was raised in between old folks. We were all mixed. [I remember kids making fun of me] because of my clothes. I mean, we would wear the same blue jeans seven days a week, without washin 'em or anything. And we would wear out our shoes, 'til they had holes. And then it was time to get another pair 'a shoes.

My sister wore long skirts with, tennis shoes. And that made everybody laugh. I remember havin a pair of pointed old lady shoes, that I wore one time to school. And I was so embarrassed that I took 'em off. I would throw 'em

away, and then I would tell my parents that I lost 'em. "Let's see what you're gonna wear tomorrow!" I didn't have no other kind'a shoes. They would say, "You know we don't have no money." And there were points that I would tell 'em, "People make fun 'a me, you know?" When I started growin up, I realize now that I was facin all this. I would come out and tell the truth. "I don't wanna wear this because people make fun 'a me." I didn't like my hair like this because they call me Chinese.

In Texas, we're all mixed. I never experienced growin up with my race. I[t] was more mixed. I was just in between the white. [Most of my friends were Black]. I guess 'cause we got along! They respected us. Now, if they saw a white person, they'd beat 'em up and stuff. But me and my sister, we got along very good with them. And I had preferred to be with the blacks 'stead 'a the white ones. I remember one time they could call me and my sister "nigger lovers". That was very popular back then, "nigger lovers". Yeah, we had a whole bunch of black friends. [Around white people, I felt] I didn't fit! Not because of my color or anything, but as human beings. I just did not fit. "Oh, so-and-so had more money" and "This girl lived on welfare or gettin food stamps"...

That was very wrong, back then. I had one friend; her name was T. But she was very popular! She was beautiful. [S]he treated us equally. And she would say "Hi" to us; we'd say "Hi". I remember one time she helped me with my math. And she was a very sweet person. She was a very nice person. And with her being wealthy and everything, she even had Black friends, too! She was so popular, she didn't let it bother her.

I went wild with [my Black friends!] We had a good time. We [were] like normal kids. Played basketball. Kickball. Do pattycake things. Normal childhood things. Climb on the monkey bars. The Mexican-American kids, one of my best friends was and my mother hated her! Because, she thought that she was the cause of my runnin away from home and everything. The Black friends, they could go to the house and sit and watch TV with us, or play in the backyard. Oh, just 'til one time, there was a rumor goin around and then it got to my father, that my sister was boyfriend and girlfriend with this little Black boy. My sister was eleven, or twelve years old and she was in special ed. And this little Black boy, you could always see K. and J. together. And he had a little mental problem. And it got to my father and, oh, God, I remember K. walkin in

and that was the first thing my daddy said. "You nigger lover!" "I don't want you to be hangin around J. no more! You stay away from that nigger!" "He's not your type!" That was the first time I ever heard my daddy talk like that! And here J. would come and sit down at the dinner table with us! And eat with my family!

Well, I come from a family with a alcoholic problem. And we've all inherited. I think that's the key right there. To be honest. It couldn't be nothin else, 'cause there isn't nothin else. We've always tried to help one another. We've managed, at one point, to pick up all the pieces, start over again. [It's] just that we have that alcohol blood that we all inherit, that has been, in some cases, the problems. I mean, my mother was always loyal to my father. And at one point, my father was loyal to my mother. We just all scattered and it's very sad. Now we look at it, and we don't seem like brothers and sisters anymore. We really don't. And it's very sad, not seein each other for six or seven years.

In some cases, I've seen a lotta changes. 'Cause as for me, I don't have an alcoholic problem. I can handle my limit in drinking. If we could turn the clock back, and you would be amazed. I am. I'm shocked! I mean, I didn't have to go to no A.A. I gave it up! With a little help. With a little advice. I gave it up! On my own. I mean, it's bad enough with them being babies and me being drunk. They never saw it. At one point, [my daughter] growin up, she'd see it. And now, she knows! She didn't know what was goin on at the time, 'cause she was small, but now, as a seven-year-old, she knows. And I don't want her to follow my footsteps. I don't want the drug of alcohol burn her body like it almost burned mine.

You don't know what happened one hour with the babies, what they do, what they eat. You don't know nothin about if it rained, if the sun was out. If there was a siren, or was the birds singin? You're just drunk. You sleep it off. You close yourself to reality. But I've learned to control. And I've learned to do without. And I see life now as it is. I see it bein a struggle. I see it straight. I think about it. I mean, it's sorta like a drug. It's up to me. How you want to go about it, you know. And I think I've been the strongest one, outta my whole family.

My sister now? She turned into a Jehovah witness. She don't believe in smokin, drinkin. She's under control of a Cuban. With one child. And twins on the way. She's changed

a lot in her life. She's different. I guess that's why she stays away. [She lives] In West Palm Beach. She'll make herself so hard and say, "Yeah, I'm happy". But deep down, I know she's hurting. She's not happy to me. She hides it very good. And she don't have nowhere else to turn to. She thinks that man is all she's got, all she has left. She abandoned two kids. [They are] in Texas runnin around free, wild. Their father was supposed to be responsible for 'em. And he has his family there, but the last time I heard about 'em, they were runnin around the streets, hangin out.

I hadn't seen my momma and my boy, in a whole year. [So I went to Texas last June.] It's still the same. I just sat there the whole two weeks and listened to my mother. Listened to her tellin me her problems. And I know that she gets a little check once a month. I know she gets a little food stamps once a month. She knew that I was coming. She could'a at least provided me with somethin. 'Cause when I walked in there, there wasn't nothin. Not even a gallon a' milk. No food. I felt like I was being used. I shouldn't'a felt that way, but I did! 'Cause I know my family. Because I had been used before. By them takin my money. I think I came back losin weight. My mother never gave me a chance to talk about anything that was goin on, especially when I was back in school...Earnin a G.E.D.

I was prayin for them days to hurry up. I couldn't go out anywhere. My mother doesn't own no car or anything. We're always walkin on foot. It was sad. Nothin hasn't changed. There's still some kinda hate there, in us! In us as a family, that I will never understand. I cannot sit down and talk to my mother. I have to sit there and listen to her. And she's not worried about anybody else. She wants you to know what's goin on. My mother hasn't never let me speak out. Let her know how my Christmases go and how my life has changed. I believe my mother sometimes envies me, [maybe] jealous because my kids are dressed. But she don't understand that my clothes aren't new. My clothes come from a thrift store.

The beginning, I got off the bus, and they all ran to me. I mean, I had dreamed of that. And I had tol' my mother what I had dreamed. And that's what happened! But a couple of hours, I was sittin there, all these things just started comin out and my son comes out to me and tells me, "Who's really my father?" In front of a couple of relatives and my brother and all this. Here I am, three days on a bus, and that's the first thing I hear from my son. He has

pictures. He has a diary. He has he has everything he needs to know. He has a birth certificate, with my name on it. And my mother told me, "Don't listen to him. He's crazy" and "He's thinks he's grown already." But deep down that hurt me, because he made me feel like, God, [my daughter's] got a different daddy. [my baby's] got a different daddy. The boy has lived in a lotta sorrow. He hasn't had the attention that a mother should have been there to give him.

I've seriously [thought of bringing him here with me.] [But] my ma. She'll erase me off my the book and she always tells us, "When I die, don't cry, 'cause none of y'all love me." But that's not true. I mean, she can hit me and she can beat on me and she can do whatever she want with me, but that's not true. I'll never hate her. I know she tried. There were some good sides of my mother that, all of a sudden, just vanished. And I always see my mother as a good person. If my mother could have anything, anything in this world, I know that it would be havin all her children back, once again. 'Cause she'll sigh and she'll say, "If I could turn the clock back, I'll start all over again."

I remember her tellin me one time, too, that she was in a reform school. And they took her first li'l boy away from her. She was young. I think she did two years in the reform school. And after them two years, her father, which was my grampa sorta pushed her outta this life. "Oh, no, she's no good; let her go." So I sit here and and I talk about these things. I realize, that there's a pattern in there somewhere with us. With me and with my family. And when I would be bad, she would tell me, "You'll never follow my footsteps." And I don't understand what she meant by that. But now I do. Knowing a little bit about her past and seein mine...

[My children] are my pride and joy. And I wouldn't give 'em up for the world. My li'l girl, I want her to finish school, have a good education, get in college. I want the best for her. I want her to find her a good man. Somebody that will take care of her, 'cause she deserves it. And I want her to be loved, and be respected for what she is. Not because of her mother having tatoos or her mother wears a hearing aid. I don't want nobody to take advantage of my girl. Never. And I know when she grows up that she has a mind of her own. I caint put my big foot in there, 'cause she'll turn out to run away from me, and leave me by myself.

I don't expect nothin from that li'l boy. He's a good kid. But he's too young right now, I haven't set a goal for him. I hadn't pictured him yet. I don't want him to grow up. But he's growin up and he dresses himself now. He's all backwards and everything, but; he tries. I really would want him to finish school. He always says he's gonna work for the trashman. He's gonna drive the truck. I can picture my baby as a lawyer, 'cause he talks! I don't want him to be like his daddy. And I hope his daddy never does come around anymore, to ruin his life. And the only way I can see all this is by me setting a good example for him. Showin 'em right from wrong, as I've experienced it.

Well, when I hug my girl, I remember my mother huggin me. Givin me a kiss on my forehead. But that word "love" I never remember it comin outta my mother's mouth. I find myself sometimes not tellin my kids every day like I should "I love you". I find myself sometimes showin my kids. An everyday thing, in our house is we have times to sit down. We have times to rest. We have times for them to leave me alone and let me cool. [Then I] can get up and fix dinner and start doin what I have to do. I've tried to keep my schedule like it's supposed to be, where I can have time with [my daughter], time with the baby, time with myself, time with my household.

When I was seven, I was] taking care of one sister, and four brothers. My mother [had already left.] [And I was] climbin trees with 'em, playin in the rain, and I was supposed to be their momma. I washed their hair. We'd go in there, make a baloney sandwich. And that was our supper. We would all sit down and watch TV together. 'Til eventually one would fall asleep, then the other. Then the other. And then me. All by ourself. I had my childhood and I had an experiences of a mother, too, mixed in. I had a mind of a woman, and the body of a baby. And I guess that's why now, the kids look up to me.

It's a funny feelin I got. I just never thought it was gonna happen to me. I've always put myself down because of everything that I had done in the past. And I never thought that it would change. But leavin the alcohol, seein life as it was. Talking. And lettin people know what was wrong. How I was managing not to be able to take care of my kids. Not havin a mother there to help you. Really changed me. And I didn't think I could do it. I mean, not without somebody tellin me what to do. It's very hard. I mean, I come from dirt. And now I hold my life in my hands, along with my children.

I got used to being [at the Learning Center] quick. I committed myself to that learning center. I was scared at the first really. Me! Twenty-eight, in school! But I was thinkin about my children at the time, and the pressure that we were in. I found myself learning a lotta things that I never in my life had learned when I was in school. Goin back and knowing why they bombed Japan and all these war things and all this history. I found myself wanting to know the past. And I grew every day more different. There was times I just couldn't wait to get over there! I was always the first one on the porch! I would run over there. I was determined to learn somethin. I wanted to talk about goals and life and the good. The privileges of having an education and earning your own money. Havin your own car. Having a mind. [It] really made me understand, that I was something. And this was the only chance I had to prove to myself that I was something. Not only to the program, but to myself.

I was learning! I was meeting people. I was socializing. Somethin that I hadn't done in two long years, livin here. I was startin to speak English again. I found the learning center, as part of my family. Part of somethin that belonged to me. I loved it. It gave me a chance. I started learnin how to use a computer. A typewriter. 'Cause I had never in my life typed. I got into the big stuff, the computers. And I enjoyed 'em. I was willing to learn, and I was willing to listen. I wanted to block the past and show people that I was a good person. I showed respect for people and I wanted the same from everybody else.

I'm mostly gonna miss the clownin around. I hadn't clowned around with people in a long time! Be happy and smile and laugh and joke around. I had really missed all that. And that learning center brought it all back to me. Accomplishing that school diploma. That's what I was aiming for. A good job. I have two brothers that have a high school diploma. And they both work in gas stations, pumping gas. I start thinkin, well, damn! They got high school diplomas! Why aren't they lawyers? Why aren't they workin in a K-Mart? Why aren't they in big things like that, with big money? It's very weird.

I felt like givin up. I felt times that I was under a lotta pressure. But that was me. 'Cause now I can work a fraction like boilin an egg! I never felt frustration in there. I mean, not hard stuff. I just would go back and think! "You're here for one reason. You got to do it.

You've got to learn how to do it!" Or you're not never gonna get anywhere. Think! Think! I would force myself. I wasn't gonna let it go. This is all I had. I grew very fond of the Learning Center. It was another home.

And half of the times, I found myself saying, well, "Look at this person. He's old enough to git out and work!", "What is he doin here?" And he's just sittin there, playin with his hair or out of it! And I feel that it's wastin the teacher's time. And wastin paper. I hated it when somebody would go in there and not try. It was hurtin the teacher's feelins. That wasn't no kinda respect.

We all had children. The same ol' problems. I never took my personal experiences or anything like that to the Learning Center. I was into more, "Oh, what we're gonna cook supper" or "What did you do this weekend?" I never used it as a gossip place. I took the Learning Center as a school. In my mind. I made friends with everybody. I was not a child. I was a grown person. And I was always taught to respect people, so people would respect me and see me as a good person. If anybody needed help, I'd run over there and help 'em. But like I said, the learning center really changed my life. I'm gonna miss it.

I'm gonna [be a manager] at the Taco Bell! [N]ever in my life, never. I mean, to be responsible for something so public. And my responsibility of takin care of it. I haven't never in my life. I've always dreamed of havin my own home, and takin care of it. One day. But this? Takin care'a somebody else's stuff. I haven't never. And I'm gonna go in there, and I'm gonna put my head up high and do it. I'm gonna do it. I've made it this far and nothin can let me down now. Nothin!

Postscript

On the same day that we completed the final interview, Gloria took a position as a manager trainee at the local Taco Bell, starting the next day. She was apprehensive at first, as were some of the staff at the Learning Center (myself included.) But she was urged by the director of the agency and the job counselor to accept the position because the salary was quite good (\$8.00/hr.) and they weren't sure we would be able to find anything better for her. Although we were assured that the management would take the fact

that she is a single parent into consideration in making her schedule, her shifts began to vary right from the start. Some days she had to work the 5pm to 3am shift. She had absolutely no time to make arrangements for the care of her children during odd shifts prior to accepting the position. Her only resource was her boyfriend who was willing to fill in until something else was found.

The transition was a tremendous strain on Gloria. Had this been the only obstacle, she might have overcome it. However, everyone involved with Gloria had underestimated the problems stemming from the fact that she had never in her life held a job of any sort, other than as a carhop and housekeeper when she was fifteen. She was unprepared for the world of work and the physical drain of working 50 hours a week. As her attitude deteriorated, she was even less able to cope with the strain. Her boss had worked closely with our agency in the past and consistently extends himself to be of service to people he hires, especially those who have a difficult time adjusting. He continues to do this for Gloria and were it not for him, I'm sure she would have quit or been fired at this point.

Gloria was required to return to the Learning Center to be tested by our training agent from Miami in order to graduate from the program. When we didn't see her at 10:00 we began calling her. She did not answer the phone so we sent one of the counselors to her home. Her children were there but she would not come to the door. We finally called her boss at Taco Bell and he went by her house with another employee and brought Gloria to the Learning Center. The other employee stayed outside to watch her children. Gloria was hostile and uncooperative and it was clear that she was under the influence of something. She barely made it through the process of certification. It was a thoroughly disturbing experience for everyone involved. What shocked me most was Gloria's attitude toward me. At one point she said to me, "I thought you were my friend. I told you my whole life story and what did I get for it? I can't call you at home. I can't call you when I have problems. What good did it do me?"

Gloria did not pass the GED test on her second try. She is five points away from a passing score, but seems to have lost interest in pursuing her diploma. She stayed at Taco Bell for about three months and her performance reviews were strongly positive. Her attitude, however, was abismal. She refused to sign any paperwork related to her participation in our program, and it was a constant

struggle each time we needed her signature. On February 26, 1991, after not showing up to work for four days, Gloria walked into the office and quit. She was two days away from having her own shift and being a full-time manager at Taco Bell. She has been hostile to our offers of help and does not want to speak with anyone from our program, including me. At this time, we unfortunately have no idea what the future holds for Gloria and her children.

Sally Wagner

Sally is a 48 year old White woman, a mother and grandmother. She has three children and three grandchildren and has been married to her high school sweetheart for 32 years. She was born and raised in Key West; both her family and her husband's family have been here for five generations. Sally did not participate in the On-the-Job-Training Program.

"What brought you to the Learning Center?"

Well, I've been comin here since May or June. I was only here one month when I took the test. I wanted a better education so I could get a better job. Right before I was just stayin at home. [Before that] I was an executive housekeeper [for] ten years. The responsibility was gettin too much. The pressure, the people not showin up for work, and havin to do their job plus my own. [I]t just started like that in the last couple of years. [I was] executive housekeeper about six years. Laundry help before that. [I] Worked myself up.

I had given it up because I was takin the problem home with me. And then it was interfering with my own homelife. Well, we had remodeled our house. And then I stayed home. And that's when I decided I was bored with the house, and I needed a job! And I wanted to get a better one than goin back to the same thing. [Right after I quit my job] it was great! My husband and I get along real good, so we had a real good time.

I went to apply for a job, and I found out to be a cashier, to be full-time, if you had a high school diploma or a G.E.D., you could get maybe seven or eight dollars an hour. If you didn't have that, then you would only be able to work part-time, and make five dollars an hour. So, if I was going to do the work, I wanted to make sure I was gonna get paid. So I decided to go back and get the G.E.D.

[When I first came to the Learning Center] I felt like a school kid again. With my book in my hand and my pencil! Goin back to school! That felt good, though. Especially once I got in and noticed that the type of people that were here was all like myself. You know, there was nobody better than the next person, and everybody was here to learn and different ages and all. It was good. I felt like I was really going to better myself by doin it. Even though I

knew I had the experience I could'a gone into any job and got it, but, some positions you just can't get unless you've got that. That's how the rules go.

I first tried out my daughter, K. And she thought it was great. And I wasn't going to tell my husband anything about it. Then I couldn't keep it to myself and when I told [my husband] he was great! He had been after me for years after we first got married, to go back and get it. And I wouldn't. I just felt like the family, my kids was more important than the education. So it was great for him. He stuck by me...very supportive. [H]e had gone back to night school and graduated. He got the regular high school diploma.

I made the first step. I felt proud as a peacock! I was singing. It was all uphill from there. [T]hat was my inner drive, I guess, that I didn't think I had or I'd have done it a long time ago! Well, like my like my husband says, it was the right time and the right space to do it. Because, as far as school went, I was a dummy in school. I call it a "dummy" because I made bad grades. That's why I quit. So then that's why I figured I wouldn't be able to make it. I had to have that drive that determination to do it.

[It] never entered my mind [before.] Because even when he brought it up to me, I wouldn't even hear it. I wouldn't even give an answer on it. I just didn't feel right with it. I didn't know I had it in [me]! It could have been the determination. Maybe it was there in the closet, 'way back and then made up my mind this is what I wanted to do. It was easier because now maybe I waited long enough to where that's what I really wanted. And before, I didn't really want it because at that time, I felt like I couldn't do it. So it had to be the right time and place for it. [It had been] thirty-one and a half years!

I think most of 'em that are comin [to the Learning Center], this is just like a playtime for 'em. Because if they were comin here, I don't think it would take 'em that long to do it. Even a year, they could do it. Depending on what grade they dropped out in, though. There shouldn't be any problem with 'em. I think I started in May. About four months [was all I was here.] That's why I said I must'a been ready for it.

The environment was really good. Relaxed. The teachers worked on us. You all had so many different levels that you

was tryin to teach, and in one room. So you had to let the students do some of it on their own. When they're comin to a problem, then you'd work individually with 'em.

Scenes from a life.

[I did] very poor till I hit, the last of eighth grade. And that was like a drive, 'cause I wanted to become a conchette [cheerleader] so I tried even harder. And I did get my grades up to a C average. I lasted through three-nine weeks and couldn't last on that. My grades fell down and that's when I quit. In the ninth grade. I had already failed the fifth and seventh one time. So I was already sixteen. By the time I was sixteen, I quit.

[I]t seemed like I was really tryin. I just couldn't get it. And basically there was nobody at home that would take the time to help me. So I just let it keep goin. Even my durned twin sister was a genius! I mean, she got all the brains! [S]he was an A and B student. It just seemed like there was nobody there or I wouldn't take the time. Play was more fun than schoolwork. I remember trying so hard that I'd almost memorize it. When I got in there with a test, it was like everything went blank. And I didn't remember nothing! I remember trying real hard.

No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't do it. And I don't know what it was that was stoppin it. So when I made up my mind to do it this time, my husband kept tellin me, "I know you can do it! I know you can do it!" And then I just felt different about it. I knew I could do it this time.

[My home life] could have affected me that way, because, like I said, there was a lotta drinkin, lotta fights. My house when it wasn't drinkin it was the best place to be. My mother would do everything she could. She was a really great woman, when she wasn't being poisoned by the drinkin. But it was the fights and we wasn't allowed to bring anybody home. No kids. No friends. And then, it made us feel bad because other kids can have friends over t'their house. It's the very old-fashioned, strict way of bringin us up, I guess. Oh, occasionally we would be able to get 'em to come over, but, inside the rooms, our bedrooms especially, nobody was allowed. They were sacred. Especially my mother, not even us kids would even go in hers. Only time was when we had to clean it, and then we'd hurry up and clean it and get out.

The first time I had failed in the fifth grade, it bothered me. Because [my twin] went ahead of me and I got teased about it. We were together in school until the fifth grade. But she kept on passin. She didn't wait up for me! [I had to repeat] the whole fifth grade. Same thing with the seventh grade. The only thing I remember is, I was talking to my mother about it, and I asked her if I could quit, and she took me up to the school and signed the papers! And then the teachers, you had to go to each class and have them sign it. And they kept wantin me to stay. They knew they said, "You can do it", but by that point, I was already an F average, and I knew I couldn't pull it up in the last nine weeks. I was really ashamed about it. It hurt that I was doin it. But then, I knew that had to be the answer at the time. At least I felt that it was.

My father used to give me some good punishments out of it. It was the main thing I used to get, was the punishments. And mother would, kinda sneak and let me do a little things on the side...watch TV when I wasn't supposed to or be outside on the porch. But my parents didn't have a good education, 'cause when they went to school, they only went to sixth and seventh grade back then. So she didn't know half the work that I was doin. I shouldn't 'a said that I didn't get the help at home, 'cause it wasn't there. The other the other kids could have helped, but no. They were busy with their own. Well, [my sister] would help once in awhile, but it wasn't that, the lesson just wouldn't seep in, and she'd give up want you know. I just couldn't get it, and she couldn't be a teacher to me and do her own!

[After I quit], I was babysitting. Right next door to my parents house. I earned some money that way. By the time I turned seventeen, I was married. I had met [my husband] that year. Not actually dating where my parents knew it, but I was dating him! So, it was around August '59 when B. and I started really gettin serious enough and talking about getting married. And we knew that my parents would never allow it, 'cause they hated him from the beginning. He wasn't allowed to come to the house.

Well, I know why my father didn't like him. Because, my father in my earlier time, had tried to have sex with me. And he was jealous of, anybody that'd come into my life. And my mother just didn't like him because she got stuck with an alcoholic husband. And she grew up with B.'s mother and daddy and they were all like friends growing up. [I]n fact my mother-in-law and my mother were the same age, named the same. My mother didn't like him because they used

to call my husband's side of the family "the monkey boys". It was just a nickname that they had. So she didn't think he would ever amount to anything. I could do better because I guess she was trying to figure out why she didn't do better than what she did.

I really didn't find out that much until after we had run off and got married, and come back and that's when I found out the true feelings that they really didn't like him. It came after. [We eloped] with my sister's help! And the babysittin house next door. I got all my clothes over there. And passed it out through the window to a friend. And B. and I got in his car and went and caught the bus. And away to Georgia and got married. Georgia you can get married at the age of sixteen or seventeen without your parents' consent. If we had stayed here, we would'a had to have their consent, and I knew that they wouldn't consent to it.

We came in on the Greyhound bus station, and naturally we found out then that they had the cops and everybody lookin for us. They checked everywhere. Thank God they didn't check the Greyhound bus station, 'cause B. was twenty-one at the time; they could have got him for takin me over the state line. But, it was all fine and dandy after we said we were married. And my parents said, "Well, you made your bed; lie in it", and I said, "Well, I intend to; that's why I got married!" But his family welcomed us right away.

When we first came back, we stayed with his grandmother. And that's we stayed there for a couple of months 'til we got our own place. He was a roofer. And naturally when we got back, he lost his job. Then I ended up pregnant! Tah dah! We had started our family right away. And then we got our own place. Columbia Laundry, I think, was the job he had then. And then he went to Coca-Cola. So there was times with work and without work.

He believed that I should be at home. Really. And I did, too. Because we were we were both raised old-fashioned. And, it wasn't until later on when the kids got older, when I started goin to work. While they were babies, I was home. I started to work because the kids was then, cheerleading. And T. was in baseball and football. And we needed the extra money. So I figured they were old enough; I could start back, start to go to work. And be home in the afternoons when they got home. Or if I was workin nights, then B. would be home with them.

[We have] five generations here, both our families. So we decided to stay here especially when we started havin our children', so our parents would have grandchildren. Later on I wished we left, after the kids were startin to grow up, I wished I would have. It would'a been harder to do it after we had the children and they already started to school...to try to uproot 'em and take 'em somewhere else. My family comes first.

When [my father attacked me] there was alcohol bein used. And it was an excuse of, bein drunk and don't know what they're doin. I was fifteen. And, it was just before the end of school I think. And I always had to clean the house before we were allowed to go to the movies or anything like that. And, my older brother was drinkin and he would sleep upstairs, and my mother on the sofa would sleep. And my daddy was in his room. Well, in order to get to go to the movies, we had to clean the house. So I attempted to go to his room. And asked him if I could clean it. He said, "Yeah."

Well, then the first thing you know, he wants me to sit on his lap and then I turned around, and he's tellin me how much he loves me more than the other kids. I was scared of him anyway. And the next thing I know he's playing with my breasts. And I just jumped up and he threatened me right there that, if I told anybody, that it would be bad for me. But the next night, I had talked to my grandmother and we had got ahold of my older sister in New York. And she had gotten me up there during the summer. [I told] my grandmother 'cause she lived right next door to our house. But I never told my mother what had happened.

You have the fear until the day that my father had died, I would never be left alone with him. I would always have somebody with me. I would not let him get close to me. Because of the fear of him, he always said smart remarks to me. Like a man would if he's trying to make an advances of another woman. And I just was very uncomfortable with it. And so was my husband, 'cause he had done that a couple of times in front of my husband, the smart remarks. So that's another reason why I think he used to hate B. as much as he did. Because he knew B. had me, and he couldn't get me.

One time I went to kiss him. I thought things was over with, kiss him good-bye when he'd come to the house. And he smacked one right on my mouth and I could tell then that, he'd never change. It'd always be that I'd have to keep the wall up. [M]y twin sister knew about it. And so did my

older sister. I'd wonder if he had ever tried anything with her. But she said he hadn't. And like I said, I could not talk to him or be around him that much. I would try to get away from him. And my mother and I was pretty close. Without telling her what had happened. And I couldn't tell her because I was afraid of what he would do to her or myself.

[I was afraid of him anyway]...because of the drinkin. Whenever the drinkin would start, there would be fights and arguments with momma and daddy. And he would beat on her and I remember times when [my sister] and I was real small, and I would cover up her mouth so she couldn't scream loud so he could hear her. 'Cause otherwise we'd get a good spankin for it, 'cause we was woke up out of our sleep and we heard what was goin on. I mean, the alcohol really changed the personality. Well, it would be periods, but the periods would last, sometimes, two, three weeks, a month...to the point where he wouldn't be goin to work. But, once it stopped it was alright.

It was very embarrassin, to see my mother comin to the auditorium when we used to have the PTA's here, and she would be half-slushed. Wonderin how she would react because she was very protective over us. And I didn't want the other friends of mine, while I was here at school to see what kind of home environment I had. When I didn't think they had the same. It bothered me a lot. And it still does now, because I think it could'a been better. If it wasn't the alcohol, 'cause it helped put my mother in a grave.

It was just one of those things. When she started, they just went on the long spiel. But when they stopped, it was fine for a long time, after they had stopped. But whenever they took the first drink, it was, until all the money's gone or you lose your job. So then it would stop. I still had the wall up. To me, people uses alcohol as an excuse for something that they really wanted to do in the first place. And I knew the way that he would look at me or the way he would talk or somethin. I knew it wasn't just the alcohol. I think it was an excuse, by usin the alcohol, when he did it.

I did deal with it. I put it away. I blocked it out. Until D. was twelve years old. And the two girls [my husband] had dropped them off over in [the shopping center.] And when they were walkin back, D. went one way and K. went the other. K. seen a guy grab D. So naturally, she'd run home for me and that was the flashback of the

attack. I had got there in time. He didn't sexually abuse her, but he started to. Then, there was the problem when D. turned to alcohol and drug abuse. It was about three years ago, I had told her what had happened between my father and I. Because the counselors was sayin that this [drug] problem was from the attack because we didn't get professional help for her. So I figured that I could tell her about what happened to me and my father. And it seemed to help for awhile.

D. went on went on livin her life, goin to school and everything. And, I found out that D. had started onto drugs when [my husband's] daddy died. And we were very close, him and I. And I don't know whether that's when she smoked a little too much dope and forgot herself in front 'a me, and then her and I got into it. And that's when I went on the guilt trip that I was the poor mother. I didn't bring her up right. Why would she be doin this?

And, so that's when she really went overboard with it. We couldn't get any help for her at that time. And then it kept goin. It was just one of those things. That you try and it just doesn't work out. She had messed up to where she couldn't graduate when she was supposed to. And then by the time she turned eighteen, she was a grown woman. There was nothin we could do about it.

The first time that happened with D., she was taken to a [drug rehab house] and tried that. And that didn't work. And she got back onto the drugs. And then it was another place in Miami; we had her for awhile there. She come out of that. And that didn't work. Well, this last time she was gone two and a half years. When she came out, she got married and then she was gettin abused by her husband. So then she divorced her husband while she was in Orlando, and she's back home now. [She's] thirty years old. She was doin great until a couple of days ago. I found out she's hittin the bottle again. Well, with an alcoholic, one drink. Eventually she'll go back to where she was.

We went on a guilt trip, especially I did. Because I was the one that was home with 'em. And I didn't see it. And I blame myself for it. But we tried to help. We tried, the talkin to her, see her through it, and it just kept gettin worse. And each time, it was worse. Then one time when [my husband] was workin, and the sheriff's department had picked her up and took her down there. And here he is, a deputy, and he's sittin down there and he hears this big loudmouth in the thing. And one of the deputies comes and

says, "Hey, B., you gotta come out here and do somethin; we got your daughter". I mean, it's sent him for a tailspin!

I had lost a lot of weight. I almost wound up in the hospital through it, because I had blamed myself so much. But then like my husband told me, he says, "You've gotta look, what's the matter with the other two? There's nothin wrong with those." So it's the road that she had picked. The road that she had taken. And the friends that she was keepin that was doin the stuff. So it wasn't my fault.

[T]hen by the time my son got up around I don't know what age he was. Let's say about fourteen, fifteen. Somehow and other had with his little friends, he got onto the marijuana. So I had it with him, with the marijuana. But his experiments didn't go as far as D. His stopped. I wanted to kill him! I was very upset. And, it seemed like D.'s didn't stop with marijuana. D. tried everything that was on the market. Everything. It was speed. The angel dust and all. I never heard of half the stuff. The crack was the last. And that was the worst. [My son is] great [now]. [He's] married. Got a baby of his own. I thought that maybe that would be the answer, if she had a child. Maybe it would'a snapped her out of it and she'd be more mature. But I doubt it. Because then if the urge ever hit her, I don't feel like raisin another child! If it came to that, we would have. Maybe God sees fit that she shouldn't have any children.

I found out, when I'd started back to work. That's what spurred me on the guilt. Because if I would'a been home, it wouldn't'a happened. But I now I know it isn't true. Because where there's a will there's a way. Anything you want to do, you can do. When did I get over it? Oh, well, my husband gave me a yellin at, and told me to get my shit together. It was not my fault. "What do you want to do? End up killin yourself?" 'Cause I had lost weight. I was only down to about a hundred and three pounds. From a hundred and thirty-five. I'd lost so much weight over a matter of a couple of months. Eventually the wall went up, to where I don't let D. affect me that much anymore. I love her and everything, but I'm not gonna let her destroy me.

Every time that D. got into trouble, we would we were there to help there. We would always bring her back home. We'd always try to help her out and stuff. And we were makin it too easy for D. Then we were told, when she came out of a program, that "You're not to take her back home". "You're not to give her the money, to help her with her

rent and stuff. "Make her do it on her own." The last couple of times, we refused to help her. I mean, foodwise, she can come to our house anytime and eat. But as far as us givin her money to pay her rent and stuff, no. She has to work for it.

I've always wondered why she picked the boyfriends that she's had. It's always been the type that's wanted to beat on her. Why is she takin and gettin these beatings and all? And that's when the counselor said that after all these years, what happened to her when she was grabbed by that guy at twelve years old, that it's like she's punishing herself for what had happened to her. And I couldn't understand that. I mean, it wasn't her fault. But at the time, we should have gotten the counselin back then, and we didn't realize it. We didn't know that the counselin would have helped solve this big problem. Unless it's just that she's punishing herself, even if it is through drugs.

D. had just as much as K. had. I mean, it was always the cheerleading. Her daddy and I was there with them. Took 'em to the cheerleading; took 'em to the football, baseball. I mean, it was an involvement family. More than what I had. And that's why it was so hard. Why did she start doin this stuff? She had some leeway. We wasn't as strict on them as we were brought up. So they had leeway. We were strict to a certain point, but not as much.

K. was determined. When she graduated from school, she told us "I will have ". And when she got married, it is comin true. I mean, she has what she wants. She's got her family. She's got a gorgeous home. She's got a good business. A brand new car. I mean, she's worked hard for it, because [her husband], he's trying to do his electrical [business.] He hasn't been home that much. And is building the house. So she's raised the kids. She's done her share of sacrificing as well. But "I will have" determination.

[My twin sister and me] we weren't identical. Momma used to make our clothes, and we used to always dress alike, which was pretty neat. We got in our fights. Some of the things I wanted, she had and I'd take. Or she'd do the same to me. I don't think we were ever that close. We didn't have that. We wasn't that close. 'Cause she was ahead of me in school.

P., the oldest lives in New York, and S. lives in Indiana. Well, it used to be real great until after my brother and daddy died. None of us are close anymore. Well, it started driftin apart, when my father was real sick in the hospital; nobody called me. And then I found out at the last minute, and he was dyin. I didn't know anything about it. And at that same time, that's when N. was so sick. It's our older brother. He had died five months after daddy did. With cancer. And then it kinda hurt me, because they knew about it, and I was unaware of this situation.

Well, my older brother and I was very close. And my father, it was an on and off thing with us. J. was in the Army, and he didn't get back until about two, three years before daddy died. And, that's when they got close. So at first, when my daddy used to be sick, [my husband] and I would go down and take care of him and all. Then after, when J. got back home, it was like every time I'd call there or go there, daddy was busy, daddy was sleepin, daddy couldn't see me, so I just stopped goin. That's when I found out, when he really got bad and was in the hospital.

I found out that my brother had been outta town for fifteen years, never called daddy or my mother when she was alive. But then, after his marriage fell apart...because he was drinkin a lot, he had come home. It was a thing of them havin daddy for himself. He tried to turn daddy against the other girls, too. It was like he didn't care for anybody in the family. What did bother me was, in the couple of years he was here, he managed to break the relationship between my sisters and me. Even my other two sisters don't even speak. We're all individual, separate people now. The twins no longer exist.

[Mother] died real young...Forty-nine. [S]he died on September 15th, and on September 22nd, I turned twenty-five. My mother and I had just gotten close... 'bout the year before she had died, we'd just started gettin real close. More like friends... I'd already had three grandchildren for her. I miss my mother. And [my husband's] daddy, 'cause he was like a daddy to me. I'd love to have them two back. But, as far as once I got married, my core was with [my husband] and then my family. Our family. The only thing I remember [wanting to be] is what I ended up bein a good housewife and a mother. That was my drive, ever since I was a kid. That was it! No school teachin. Nothin like that! I just wanted to have a good family and all.

I've lost quite a bit [of my family]. There was a night when B.'s grandmother passed away. Then I lost my mother within months after that. Then my daddy passed away. Then it was within months that I lost my brother. It just seemed like it was all at one time. I lost plenty of 'em.

[My husband's] mother left when he was six years old. She just picked up and took off. Left the three kids with the grandmother. And she kinda helped raise them. They knew all along [where his mother was.] She lived in Miami. They used to go up there and visit her once in awhile. They [eventually] re-married, and they lived here a number of years. Then he built the house up on Sugar Key. And it wasn't long after he'd completed it, he had a, stroke, became almost a invalid. To where he couldn't do for himself. And he and mother moved in with us. I used to work, come home, help take care of daddy. B. would take care of him, 'cause mother couldn't take care of anybody sick...she didn't wanna do it. Mother was a very selfish person. She's the type that I couldn't get close to. And in '75 [my husband's] daddy died.

[My mother-in-law lived with us] for a little while. But, her and I had a disagreement, because I had the kids I was takin care of, and workin, and mother wasn't doin anything. And this is where B. really learned how selfish of a person she was. So we had a coupla words and she had to get out. Live somewhere else. She's remarried six or seven years, now, I guess. But she comes into town every once in awhile. He's never been close with his mother. The kids they had gone through so much, because they had stepmothers. And stepmothers used to mistreat 'em because they had their own children. B. really had a hard time with his mother just [leaving.]

I was working at Grant's, at the shoe department, when B.'s daddy passed away. But when my husband had back surgery, I stopped workin. And about a year later, I went to work for the Ramada Inn, working in the laundry department, and I worked myself up until executive housekeeper. And I was that until two years before I decided to come in and have get my G.E.D.!

[Working in the laundry room] was neat. It was different. I wanted that type of job, 'cause I didn't feel like being around people. I really shocked B. when I did. 'Cause he didn't expect me to go work in a laundry. And it was nice. It was washin the sheets and the towels and all this good stuff. I enjoyed that work. Well, it was busy. It

was hot. At first, when I started workin, all you see [is] these white sheets and towels and stuff.

I became the supervisor to the laundry, so then I just had to make sure that it was getting done. And then moved up to the assistant supervisor of the laundry. At the time, I had a coupla years in there. I knew what I was doin, I don't think I've ever missed a day's work. 'Cause even if I didn't feel good, I'd still go to work. I'd have to really be down and out before I'd go miss a day's work. [A]fter I became the executive housekeeper. I had to make sure the supplies, of time cards, of scheduling, on and off days. And if somebody didn't show up, then I would have to reschedule, call on somebody else. If not, then I would end up doin those rooms. That was quite a chore.

[My husband] was the accountant for the sheriff's department for about twelve years. They're all deputy sheriffs down there. But his was in the financing department. He could drive in the cars with the others, if they needed him. [H]e had gotten hurt in the sheriff's department, gettin some books outta one of the safes. And he fell on the ladder. So he was outta work for about a year. And he had to retire because of the back injury.

[I used to spend my time] swimming, doing housework. Taking care of the grandchildren. K. had her children in tap and jazz. Ballet. Oh, it's just different things that we done like that. Goin shoppin. Window shoppin, 'cause you can't buy very much! Fixed up the house, painted, remodeled. And then when all that got done when there was nothin else left to do, it was time to get on! "Now I'll go back to work." And then that's when I found out that the places did require a either a high school diploma or a G.E.D. or equivalent. I would have eventually ended up here. It was in the book already.

[I've travelled a lot.] The trip to Vermont. That was my very first trip. The first plane ride and everything. And the snow. I don't remember the date; it was about six years ago. [My husband's] brother decided that he wanted to give my husband a good treat. And he ended up payin for our way to Vermont. And we had a family get-together up there, on his side of the family, the kids and everything. I was scared to death to ever fly. And I just did it. Got on the plane and went to Vermont and had the ball of my life in the snow. We're plannin another one this year, comin up.

And then, the same year we went overseas to Germany. I loved that. His brother works, with the Enquirer, and he comes across some good deals. If we book 'em ahead of time, it was more reasonable where we could afford it. And we didn't have the kids at home, so we could afford even more! All the money I was makin on my job, I was takin and stashin to pay for the trip.

It was one of the times that we all got together, him and [his girlfriend], [my husband] and I, and we decided a trip. And, so we went to Germany. It was several other places around Germany we had visited first. [We] travel great together! I really enjoyed it because I found out that the people are different. They're more friendly. Whereas, like here in the United States, you can't leave anything out or somebody'll steal it from you. Over there, they don't do that kinda stuff. You can leave anything out.

I was the full tourist! The next trip we went on was to Hong Kong and China. So each year, it was someplace different. That was neat. Couldn't believe it! We went through Taiwan. And then to Beijing. Walked the Great Wall. That was fantastic. [When I was young] it never really entered my mind about traveling. But when it happened, now you can't keep me still, 'cause I wanna go all the time!

Then B. and I's been to England with another couple, which didn't work out as good as with his brother. That was great, because we got to go see Buckingham Palace. And the jewels and all that stuff. Fantastic! It's showed me one thing, for sure, that we call it "the ghettos" here, and they call it "the slums" over there, but everywhere's got the same problems. You've got your very poor class of people, durn near starvin, just like we have here. When we got back, I was glad to be home.

You see things. You may read it in books and you don't believe it. The cultures. I like the culture of it. Different foods. The different way they live. I found out that in Hong Kong, you are only allowed to have so many kids. Whereas over here, it doesn't make any difference. They just keep havin babies! Whether they can afford 'em or not.

[We've been to] Switzerland, Germany, Austria. We traveled by train. And when we got off the train, we just spend one or two nights in one place, and just kept movin. Switzerland was great. I was afraid we'd get lost. But then, one time B. and I decided to go to England by

ourself. And then I said, "Oh, what the heck." So we managed real good. We'll go anywhere now! But, at first I was scared of it. Especially when we went to Hong Kong. That was fourteen hours on the airplane. I'll do it tomorrow, if I could!

We've been different places [in the States], like up towards Indiana. For my sister, to see her, for one time. Then we went to New York. Then we went to towards Texas. I think after we get burned out on overseas, we'll start doin a lot more in the United States. To see it and to live it, rather than read it out of a book. Now when we see parts of movies or something we'll see different areas. Like in Hong Kong, the Red Light District and stuff like that we actually went to. And you say, "Ah, I've been there!"

Once I started [here], I was determined I was gonna do it. I had to complete it! [If I had quit coming here] I think my husband would have tried to encourage me to turn around and come back. 'Cause he knew I already started makin my first steps in this...he had wanted me to do it years ago, and I wouldn't do it. He would have tried to talk me back into it.

I think I was the oldest one here, too, [but] everybody was here for the same reason. I really didn't feel out of place or uncomfortable with it. I think I felt better by comin here, because after I thought about it if I'd 'a went to the high school, I think it would'a been more like a classroom. You know, you have to do it this way. But by comin here, it was everybody worked at their own speed. I felt real comfortable with that. The group thing helped a lot. And then, once I got home, I would really work on it. Keep goin through the book and keep workin on the problems that I needed to work on. [E]very day I'd leave here and I'd work up until suppertime. And after suppertime 'til eleven o'clock. Even on the weekends.

[The first time I sat in front of a computer] I didn't know what to do! I really didn't know what to do! That was my first time sittin in front of anything here it is! I never thought I'd be doin it. I bragged it off [to my husband]!

[My husband] went through the school to do his. That as the regular high school. Mine was the G.E.D. At that time, it would have been almost impossible because of the

children. I didn't have anybody to take care of the kids those nights. So when he wanted me to do it, he was gonna stay home with the kids and let me come to school. Even if it would'a been before he got his or after. But I wasn't ready for it.

I guess B. and I was more or less like the same background. Not only feelin that we were gonna be married and stay together. I think, too, where he came from a [broken] home...maybe he felt more determined to make it work. And where mine was the bad drinkin and all this, that I was determined to make it work. There was no way of bringin children into the world if you was gonna, have the same background that we did.

So that maybe that's why it worked out as good as it did. I tell B., sometimes we get to talkin about our families, how it was when we was growin up and all. And I tol' him, your mother oughta be proud of you boys, because you all could'a grew up a lot worse than what you did. You could'a been gettin into your trouble. You could'a ended up in prison. That's why I think B. and I did so great, because of our bad backgrounds, it could'a been worse. We could'a went a different road, but we picked the right road. What was that poem 'bout two roads in the woods? That's right.

Well, maybe it's because even though I just turned seventeen when we got married, you make up your mind your life is what you make it. Even though we felt that our lives was bad, we had to make our own way. You make it to the way you want. In some cases, you can alter it.

I'm proud of myself. I don't think I am an intelligent person, because there's always somethin else you can learn. I've come a long ways, because it's showed me that I could do it. Maybe, before that, I didn't think I could do it. But I feel like I've gone ahead. In other words, I feel like I could step into somethin now and don't have to really work real hard at it, that I could go in and I could catch on real fast, and I could do it. And achieve what I've wanted to do.

[But my] biggest accomplishment was gettin the diploma. I'd made up my mind when I came, that I was gonna complete it, no matter how long it took. [I] got a job! And it's been a month, and I still like it. I'm in a hurry to get to work. Which is a good sign because that means you like what you're doin. So far, what I've been working on

the computer. And I seem to like that because I hate it when three o'clock comes. So I'm enjoyin it. I know there's a lot more I've gotta learn, but I'm learnin it.

Postscript

Sally has begun a new career. I recommended her for an office position I knew was opening. After interviewing Sally the director hired her immediately. She thoroughly enjoys her new position; she had wanted to get out of the housekeeping type jobs and pursue a different career after she received her GED diploma. This job was the perfect opportunity. Without exception, everyone speaks very high of her. They are impressed with her performance and how quickly she learns on the job. She has become the primary resource person for all the data entry work in the office. She is doing so well that the last time I visited the office, Sally was instructing the director on how to input data on the office's mainframe computer.

On a sadder note however, her daughter D. went back to drugs and alcohol. During the final interview, she had begun drinking again and Sally was quite concerned. A few weeks later, she was arrested during a sting operation at a local crack house. She had pawned a piece of her jewelry and was trying to buy fifty dollars worth of crack cocaine from some local dealers. The dealers turned out to be undercover police officers. The judge was fairly lenient and she was released to her parents custody. After serious negotiations among Sally, her husband and her daughter, they decided that D. could move back into her parents' house and live under their supervision. Sally continues to be unsure about how all of this will work out in the end. They are taking it one day at a time.

Michelle Davis

Michelle is a 28 year old Black woman. She is married to the man she met in high school and is the mother of three children. She was born and raised in Key West. When Michelle first came to the Learning Center, she had been seriously ill for a long period of time and had just been released from the hospital seven days prior to enrolling. Michelle participated in the On-the-Job-Training Program.

"What brought you to the Learning Center?"

I was in the hospital and I was going through operations for my sickness. I had several operations I almost died from. In the last operation I went through, I almost lost my life. And I asked God if he'd let me recover from this operation I would do the right thing by goin back to school and get my GED, get me a job to help my husband. So my sister started school at the Learnin Center, and I told her to make an appointment for me to come in to see the teachers so I could get in the classroom too. I came and I joined the class and I wasn't even out the hospital 7 days. I wanted to go to work and I wanted to be able to read, do math and English and readin and writin. I never could [write.] So I decided to go back to school and learn these things all over.

I had infection of the sweat glands and I couldn't hold onto my kids. I couldn't do nothin for myself and it was very hard but I overcome it. I had like 16 operations already at this point in my life and I just try to take one day at a time. I have to try to beat my sickness, don't let my sickness beat me. That's how I feel, because this kinda infection that I have is a real serious infection, and my doctor said that he never seen nothin like this before.

I thought I was gonna die several times, especially the first two operations I had, when they cut the skin from underneath my arms [and] when they cut the sweat glands from the back of my neck. It was like "Oh, don't let Michelle see this because she won't be able to deal with it." So the whole twenty three days that I was in the hospital nobody let me see my operation. It was like "Well, I'm goin home and I'm gonna see it anyway." I heard people talkin and sayin "Oh, that woman her head look like a skeleton." And I'm there like "Who they talkin about?" So I went home and I got the mirror. I was just curious about

the operation that I had. I coulda dropped the mirror 'cause I couldn't believe what I seen. I had like a skeleton head. You could see the bones in back of my head.

I used to like have to get in the showers on my hands and knees. Oh man, I went through a horrible time. I had sweat glands removed from the back of my neck, my arms, my pubic area and my butt. I said "Momm, pass me the Bible." She said "But babe, how you want the Bible when you can't even read the Bible?" I said "Momma, I just need this Bible." And I opened up the pages and big words inside the Bible that I didn't know I learned through my sickness. And it was like I had a memory loss from my sickness because a lot of things that I used to know I didn't know any more. Even being here at school at the Learnin Center, I know how to spell a word or I know what the word is, and I would like go ask the teacher because I'm not sure about it. It comes back to me. And I figure well hey, you gotta make up your mind now 'cause this is a choice in your life. What you wanta do? And I decide to come, to go to school because that's how I feel I would get help and the pieces inside my head would be put back together. Because it cost me a lot of confusion, 'cause I didn't know if I was goin or comin. So I decided to go to school.

I had like a nurse that come to my house every day, and she would have to change my bandages four times a day. And my determination for school was I'm goin to school and my husband said "No, you're not goin to school 'cause you just got out the hospital and you can't go sit up in no school no four, five, six hours so you better give it up." I said "No, I'm not givin it up." So I told the nurse "Do not come to the house no more," 'cause I feel I could go to school. So she said "Ok Michelle, if your husband ask me I'm a just tell him. And she agreed she'll come once a day when I get out of school at 3:00.

And it was like I came in this school with my butt open, my pubic area gone, and I was wearin the pants. I couldn't wear underwear, and I used to like move around. But it was just my courage for school kept me here... 'cause it's like this is somethin I want. I keep tellin my husband every day. "I'm a get that GED. I'm a get it." And he said "Oh babe, you aint gonna get it." I say "Yeah, I'm a get it and when I get it I'm a show all of y'all that tried to say no."

A lot of people like my friend would understand what I went through, but it was hard for my family to deal with.

'Cause it's like of the family, they always depend on me. "Well, Michelle do it 'cause she know." I don't think I could take it, 'cause during that last operation I went through, they rolled my bed from out the room and my momma stay in the hospital for 34 days with me, and when the rolled the bed out the room she thought I was dead. She had a heart attack in the hospital. And Dr. C. had told her that I need 10 pints of blood right quick 'cause [I] was losin so much blood."

And my husband, it took a lot of effect on him too, because he couldn't be there when I had to surgery but the night before I was cryin "No Lawrence, I'm scared. I don't wanta go no more." And he said "Well, you gotta like try to forget about what happened the last time. You gotta try to pull through this and you gotta be strong. I said "Well, I know what I go through. You gotta try to provide for us, but one day it's gonna be that god gonna fix it so I can do the same thing with you. I'm gonna help raise my three kids and provide a house for my kids." I'll get through it. I didn't give up. The doctor said, he don't know how I recovered from this, lookin at me today and seein me movin like it's nothin. I said "Look, this is somethin I really want." A lot of people are "Well, you should quit school 'cause you're not ready for that." I didn't let the people discourage me, because this is what I want. I said "1991 gonna bring me something good."

I remember when I first got sick. I was in the Virgin Islands, and I started like breakin around with little bumps underneath my arms. And I told my husband and he said "Well, change the deodorant." I stopped usin deodorant and I said "Well, you gonna have to take me to the doctor." So he took me to the dermatologist in the Virgin Islands and he told me "Well, I think you need to go home back to the United States because I don't think we could do nothin for you here in the Virgin Islands." And that night I went home and I called my momma and I said "Momma, I need for you to send for me." So she send me the plane ticket and I went home with my two kids.

I had 47 cysts upaneath one arm. The other arm I had like 28 cysts. I went home to my mother and my father. And my baby girl was about 6 months old and [my other daughter] was 3 1/2. I start hollerin for my momma when I got out the cab, and my baby was slidin down my arms and I said "Momma, please hurry up. Come get the baby" and by the time she got there the baby already done slide half way down my leg.

So I went in my momma house and I went upstairs and I take off my clothes, take a shower, and my momma say "I need to see how sick you is. I'm comin in anyway." So she came in the bathroom and she said "I don't even know if you gonna live or die because you said you was sick but I didn't believe it." Then she said "You gotta let your father see this." The blood was pourin down my arms then, and my daddy fell on the floor. They took me to the hospital. I went through that six times. I was sick every other week again.

Dr. R told my momma that I had pimples and if I take the Acutane that pimples will go away. My momma and daddy spent \$138 every two weeks for these pills. Acutane did not help it. So momma took me to the pharmacy and we sat on the bench and she was cryin and she said "Babe, please tell me. You think you got cancer?" I said "No, I don't think I got no cancer. It's something wrong with me and we got to find out what." So we walked down the street and we went back to the hospital, and my momma took me to the emergency room and the doctor used to get out the books tryin to find out what was wrong with me. But it wasn't in the book.

He had to call a surgeon in. I was like a experiment and he said "Well the only way I could get rid of this is if you let me cut it out." So I agreed to let him do it 'cause I thought I had cancer. That's what I thought but it wasn't that. So I agreed. I went through that, and it took him 13 hours before he got me out of the operatin room, from cutin both of my arms. And then when I recovered I was in a lot of pain and I didn't know where the pain was comin from. I stayed in the hospital for 24 days and then he told me that he wanted to do skin grafts. A week later I went in the hospital and I went through that third operation.

[I felt] scared, maybe I might expire. And I said maybe this was my last trip to the hospital to have those surgeries, 'cause I have bad nightmares about it. I had like a long trip down the road. [Sixteen operations in] eight years. I didn't have no problems like that, before, none. It was a nightmare for me because even my husband, momma and his sisters and everybody used to treat me different, like Michelle got all these sores and we not bathin in that bathroom. I was even feelin how scornful people was bein to me [in the Virgin Islands], and I told myself well I can't take this no more.

Now [the doctor] said "Well Michelle, you can't do too much heavy liftin and you can't stand on your feet too long

because of the operations that you done been through." But he said "Well, maybe, I'm gonna give you a dishonorable discharge outta here. He say "I don't have to see you no more. I was real happy to know that, to me I believe the Lord answered my prayer, to be honest with you, 'cause when I told you I was in the hospital and I told my momma to pass me the Bible. I said a prayer 'cause I had the priest to come from my church and pray with me on Sundays when I couldn't make it to church. And that was my main prayers. I was always askin was to make me better and to help me to go back to school. And I would like to get a job to where my husband don't have all that stress on him, where I could be able to help. 'Cause I know it aint easy raisin three children.

I feel okay. It's just that I'm like excited right now. My GED and gettin my certificate for the job trainin. God must be answerin my prayers slowly but surely because I feel like I'm lookin on the bright side and I'm being positive about everything now, and everything that I do I'm serious at it. I feel my operations changed me a lot too, because I used to always feel down to where I like to go ridin every day in my car and didn't have time to think about goin back to school, raisin the baby. I don't have to do that anymore because I feel school is where I want to be now.

I feel that I had needed a education. So when my daughter asked me "Well momma, help me with this" and I couldn't read it, that's why I feel that school is important to me too. Cause I remember I was in the hospital and she came in my hospital room and I said "Well, how was your day?" and she go "Oh fine. Momma, do you think you can help me with my homework?" And it's like "Oh no, I forgot how to do it." That's why I feel it's important because when my children come to me and ask me and it's like "Oh no, I can't do it. Go ask your daddy" you know. Then I would go in the room and cry because I couldn't do it. I said well okay, no more cryin. But now I could go home and do math and I can read to her now that I'm here. I can do it.

Well, when I first came in it was like I'm a learn how to work the computers all over again, and I'll have a teacher to talk to who I'll see every day and talk to her about my problems. I'm the type of person well I hold it all in. That's how I felt. I'm comin to school. They're gonna accept me because I really need the help. And every day I really learned a lot over the four months that I been

here. 'Cause when I came here I was at a 4th grade level and now I'm sittin at a 7th, 8th grade level.

I don't be depressed like I used to be...Nowhere to go, nothing to do. Just want to sleep. It's like oh, I got to go to school now and hurry up. And my husband "Well you more devoted to the school then you devoted to the house. What it gonna be, the house or the school?" I say "Man, it's gonna be the school. What you talkin about?" He told me everyday he come to see me at school and he talk to my teacher about the progress I'm makin here. And it's like "Oh babe you're really learnin." And I said "I know, and if it wasn't for you and the teacher I don't know what I would do" and he say "You can't say that because it's really yourself." I say "Yeah, but without y'all standin by me to help me when I need help on things I didn't know what to do. And I guess it was the love. I felt loved too from both of them, the love and the thoughts was with me. Like they felt I could do this...my teacher and my husband. I didn't give up.

One time I got discouraged about a conversation [with] my husband. I came back to the school and I told it my teacher, and she said "Well Michelle, nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent." And I'm up there like "Well, my husband did it to me last night" and she said "But you can't let that get to you 'cause you're gonna find people in this world that's gonna do that." And ever since we had that conversation I don't let nothin bother me now. I'm happy 'cause I go to school every day and if I can't make it on time I call. Well, that's not that often though.

I come to school because I really want to learn. That's another thing, and out of five children I'm the only child that's really gonna give my mother and father somethin. The rest of the kids aint tryin to do nothin. Now my other sister she's tryin. She's tryin to come to school but it's like [she] don't have it in her like I do. And my sister it's like "C'mon Rhonda." I go to her house every morning and I wake her up. "C'mon. I've been up since 6:00. We've got to hurry up and let's go to school." But, I tell her, "You want to take the GED you've got to work real hard 'cause I'm doin it."

Well, I don't know if it's from my sickness, bein sick gave me the strength to do what I got to do. You know every night I would put my kids to bed 8:00. I would kiss my kids and sometime as I hugged them I would cry because I don't

know what tomorrow's gonna bring. [I look forward to] the bright side. And my daughter tells everybody "Well, my mumma go to school now and she gonna take her GED" and I feel my kids are proud of me and my mother and my father and my husband and most of all I'm proud of myself.

I went out this weekend and I bought two picture frames and something gonna come. Job Training gonna give me one [certificate] and I'll get the other one on the GED. And they will be sittin up in my front room. And I will get a small copy for me and a big copy for my mother and my father, because my mother struggled a lot with five kids, and it's she didn't have the time to give us the things that we needed to learn in school, and to me, to return what she couldn't give me by giving her my high school diploma I think she'll be very happy. Out of five kids none of 'em ever graduated, and we all got married, pregnant and my brothers quit school.

My mother and father didn't finish school, but I told my mumma about four months ago, when I was in the hospital, I said "Mumma, you know what? "Don't cry because I'm gonna give you something very special." I tell my mumma, "I'm tired of babysittin and I'm tired of makin babies. I need to go do something for myself." And this is what I needed to do for myself but it's gonna be a big surprise for my mumma too.

Bein without school for the last 10 years, I lost a lot. I got a lot of experience with the children and everything, but my main thing that I really wanted to do, I lost it. Goin to school, I was on basic skills readin and math. From junior high all the way. And one day my husband said "Well, you doin 6th and 7th grade work and you in the 9th grade." "Well they don't teach you algebra or none of that?" I didn't even know what algebra was until I came to the Learning Center and my teacher teach me how to do it. And fractions, I didn't know how to do fractions until my teacher showed me how to do it, and right up to this day I could still do it.

Scenes from a life.

[I didn't like school at first] because my mumma had moved us from one neighborhood to another, and the neighborhood that we used to live in was white and she moved us to the ghetto. I didn't want to be there. And it

played tricks on my mind. I would go to this black school and I didn't want nothin to do with the people because I felt I didn't want to be there.

I went [to this school when it was an elementary school] for four years. From kindergarten to fourth grade. And then we had to move from to Thomas Street, and I told my mumma I didn't want to go live back there, and I want to stay to this school. And she said "No, you goin to a new school and you'll like it." I said "I'm not gonna do no work if you take me." So when I got back there I didn't do anything. I didn't get along with the teachers and I didn't like the people, and the principal called [my mumma] in and told her that I wouldn't do no work for them and I wouldn't say nothin to nobody and I kept cryin that I wanted to go back to Harris School.

And one day I remember sneakin off the playground and goin home about 10:00 in the morning, and I told her "I don't want to go to that school. I want to go back to Harris." "The only thing they want to do [here] is fight and pull people hair" and one day the girl had stabbed me with the pencil. She stuck me with a pencil and I turned around and I stabbed her with the scissors. The principal told my mumma, "I think Michelle havin a lot of problems adjustin with the school." And mumma sent me back to Harris School. It took me a long time to adjust back to Harris, and they kept me back in the fourth grade. But then I graduated in the fifth grade and went to junior high.

I got to sixth grade they had me on basic skills, English, readin and math, and it was like I always had a computer to teach me how to do math, and it was always basics. I was like a C and D student [in middle school]. And every year I went to summer school. Even if passed I still went to summer school because this is what I wanted to do. And when I graduated from Harris School to go to [middle school] I had another choice in my life. Either go to Archer or go to Horace. I told my mumma "I'm not goin to Archer because that's where all those black people are and I don't want to go to Glen Archer." And she said "Well, that's where your sister at." And I said "I'm going to another school." So I made up my own mind to go to Horace and I walked all the way there every day back and forth.

'Cause, all the black people was bad, and I didn't like them beatin up on other kids. They always want to gang up on people in the hallways. And when I was goin to Horace

School, they had a riot from the Archer people comin over tryin to beat up the black kids that went to the white school, and they brung like knives, sticks, bats and bottles and guns and all of that, tellin us "We gonna kill all the white people walkin in. Some of the people my daddy knew, and he went and he spoke to their parents about what was goin on. They didn't bother me no more and I lived my life, like I wanted.

My little sister Rhonda went to Sands (special needs) because she had a learning problem. And little brother, he end up going to May Sands because he was hyperactive. I went where I wanted to go, and I made it through. My three years over there I did very good. I was on basic skills readin and math still, and I did good. I had regular biology and science and p.e. As I was goin to the tenth grade I got married to my husband and I got pregnant. I had my baby and I start goin to night school and that's how I end up goin to the 11th grade 'cause I kept goin every summer.

I met my husband at a softball game. He was in the Navy and I was in the 9th grade when I met him. When we got married he was 21 and I was 17. We've been married for 10 years goin on 11 now. When [he] asked me I kept saying "No, you gotta be crazy. I gotta finish school man. I can't just jump up and get married to you just like that." He said "I want my baby to have a name." I said "The baby is going to have a name, my last name." He said "That aint good enough. I want it my last name." "I want it under the same roof." And I said "Ok." He asked me 13 times to marry him, and the last time he got down on his hands and knees and I said "Yeah" and we got married. My mumma and my father signed the papers and me and him got married. I was five months pregnant.

I was goin to day school when I was pregnant, but right after I had the baby I was goin to night school. They didn't know I was pregnant. I wasn't showing. They told you that you had to quit and go to night school. I was still goin to night school after I had the baby, and then I would go to summer school during the summer.

And then we went to the Virgin Islands. Stayed there for two and a half years and I got sick, came back home. My husband stayed over there four years. I had my little girl over there. I didn't like [living there]. Because it was like for the old people. Like if you want to retire you could go there and hide away, 'cause there's only two ways

off that island: either you get on the plane or you get on the boat, and I'm not used to that kind of life.

I'm used to like hop in your car and we could go anywhere we want to go. My husband asked me the other night. He said "Let's go back and live in the Virgin Islands" and I looked at him. I said "You gotta be crazy. Now if you want to go live in the Virgin Islands go ahead but not me." It's not for me. I'm used to my city life, and it's dead country. You see these big ole hills and I'm not used to that. Cows and goats everywhere. To me it was boring. Nothing to do. You go to church on Sundays and everybody go to work, and nothin to do.

[My husband didn't come back with me] because he was workin. He had a job at the College of St. Croix. I took my two kids with me, and my little girl didn't want to go. I used to call [my husband] every Saturday for two and a half years. And me and my oldest daughter and my baby would go to the phone every Saturday morning at 7:00, and I would call him. He tried to do everything for me when I was in the Virgin Islands, and nothin he done didn't help me. The only choice I had was to leave and go home, and my mother and father were fine help for me. I had never got upset with him about me bein sick, and he never treat me like I was a sick person. I didn't get upset 'cause I had to think about my children. I had to be strong for my kids. He'd send me money every week, you know, from his paycheck. He'd send me \$200 for me and the kids.

I'm not the type of person that just give up. I always fight for what I want, and this is something I want to do. I asked God to help me through it and he did. I remember one time when I was in the hospital and I was so down and depressed to where I called my priest to come and say prayers with me to take away the bad feelings and the scaredness that I had, the night before my surgeries. And I told him that I was scared and he said "Michelle, you got to leave it in the lord's hands." And I said "Okay" and I turned everything over to god. I closed my eyes and I said "God, if I don't wake up from this, take me as bein happy, and I hope a lot of people don't suffer from me bein gone, and I hope you give me strength enough to come back to my kids and my husband." So when I opened my eyes I kinda figured he let me come back. And I really felt that I really died and came back. That's how I really feel. I'm like a different person. I take everything serious.

I went to get my little girl report cards, and we were sittin down and her teacher will tell me, "Well I'm very proud of you 'cause you came a long way. I remember three years ago when

Shewana was in my first grade class, she wouldn't do nothin 'cause you were sick. And one time I remember when I came to the telephone and called you at the hospital to see how you was doin so I could reassure [her] that you not dead." The only thing my daughter kept thinkin well my mumma gonna die. And [the teacher] would tell me, she said "I think what you doin is great because your kids, they gettin an education and you're very concerned about their education. Any little thing go wrong in the classroom you always want to know about it or you come to school." I told her, "Look, if my mumma woulda did for me what I did for my kids, maybe I woulda had a better life than I have now."

My mumma didn't have time to sit us down to do our homework or to sit us down and read and do what a normal child should do, like I do with my kids. I'll come home from school. We'll do homework together, do math, do readin, homework that they supposed to do, book reports and all this stuff. My mumma didn't have time for that 'cause my mumma had a drinkin problem.

Five children plus me, and my daddy was on the police force and he was always gone. I remember her and my father always fightin a lot too. And we used to have to go out in the yard and listen to our mumma and daddy fight. And I remember mumma had took the gun and she tried to shoot my daddy and the bullet went through the chair and out the back of the chair outside. And we all ran inside 'cause we all thought our mumma was dead. And it was like when I get big, I'm not gonna let this happen to me. And we kept discussin it, me and my sisters, in the yard while mumma and daddy were inside fightin.

And my grandma told me before she died, she said "Michelle, I want you to listen to your husband and I want you a good mother to your kids" and I say "Grandma, I promise you I will be a good mumma." And anything my kids need, my daughter she needed to learn how to read. When I got better out the hospital I paid for a tutorer for my daughter and my daughter is a B honor roll student. And my little girl that's in the first grade, she's a B honor roll student too. So it's like I'm really givin my kids what my mother didn't give me. I'm there for them.

I can't remember all of it. But when I look at my mumma had a problem and it wasn't nobody there to help her. And she had to do the best she can, trying to clothe six kids and feed 'em. Mumma and me used to have to take a shopping cart and go to the Salvation Army and buy us used clothes and everybody else would wear new clothes to school. So when I got bigger I learned to accept what people gave me. A lot of people don't accept used things, but I do. I always remember where I come from too. Like my husband will like joke with me like "Ok, my brother comin tonight and I show him where you came from." "Well honey, I'm not ashamed of where I came from." "What, back there in the ghetto?" What that mean?" That's what I tell him 'cause I let him know that I'm not ashamed of my life.

[He] is from a different background. His mother owned her house. His sister owned they house. His brother owned his. And they always worked for what they wanted, and my mumma went to work once for us, and then she quit 'cause she had to take care of us and be a homemaker doin the things that a mother is supposed to do. I remember when I turned 14 and I used to go to work during the summer. I used to give my mumma my whole paycheck, and didn't even take a dime out of it 'cause I always felt I'm a help my mumma so she don't have to try to struggle to feed the other four kids. So when I got paid on Fridays I would tell my mumma "C'mon, let's go to the store. Call a cab and we'll go to Pantry Pride and I'm a buy all the groceries, anything you need."

And still today whatever mumma need I'm a give because my mumma is very important to me in my life because she was there for me when I was sick and she's there for me when I'm better. I let her know that. Like yesterday I went home and I told her "Mumma, I know we fuss and we fight sometime, but I love you in spite of all the bad things." I really had bad points in my life too, when my whole family went on drugs smokin crack, my whole family. My older sister and my youngest brother, plus my mother. And it was like I had my three kids, I had to raise my sister three kids. My brother wandered out in the street. My sister went astray and it's like my mumma don't want to do the right thing and it made me so disgusted. I didn't give up.

I had enough strength for me and the other people that needed strength too. I didn't let it take over, 'cause when my sister was doin crack she drove in a buildin with her car and she bust up all her teeth and she told me she didn't want to live. I said "Look, these are not my kids.

They your kids and you need to be a better mother to them than your mother been to you. I took care of them kids for 6 years. I'm they mother.

Yep, the drug problem. That's where it led 'em. It's like my sister was doin crack for the last six years, and only way she would get help was to go to prison. It hurted me. Last Christmas I had a very sad Christmas. I remember I was home and I went out and I bought all these gifts and I was sittin to the table and a song was playin. I was wrappin the gift and I got to the point where I couldn't even wrap my children gift 'cause all the tears is runnin down my face. I thought about the Christmas before that one when the family was just tore apart, people in jail, my mother livin in Savannah. I didn't have anybody and it was like well hey, you gotta grow up now because you got your kids and you got your husband. But it hurted and I told 'em this Christmas, "Look, if I have to put up with a sad Christmas like I went through last Christmas, I'm a leave. I'm a pack my kids up and I'm a leave all y'all. Now if you want to fuss and get back on that crack I'm a leave y'all."

I always try to do the right thing that's supposed to be done. I just like dealt with it. It was reality. They was doin it. I couldn't hide it. And people said "Michelle, your mumma down in the corner smokin, or your sister in the alley and she hurtin." I went lookin for them. I went to every crack house. And one time I remember when I had got in my sister face and I jacked her up and I said "Look at you. What you better do is get in this car and let's go home now." I put her in the car and I took her home. I bathed her. I gave her food to eat and I made her lay down in the bed. And the next day she went out smokin again, and then she went to [the drug rehab program] and she called me. "Michelle, could you please come to me" and I said "No, I don't want nothin to do with you because you keep lyin to me and I hate a lie." So I went anyway in spite of my pride.

So she said "Michelle, please take care of my kids." I said "Well, who be mindin 'em for the last six years anyway? I'm the mumma so what's the difference?" Three months later she was right back on it again. And the last time they took her to jail. She found some speakers by the dumpster and she took 'em to the pawn shop and they were stolen speakers, so they got her for dealin in stolen property. She called my from the jail house every day and I talked to her. She told me when it was court time. I went

down there. I aint never had a ticket. I aint never been to jail. Do you know what that's like to go in a place that you aint got no reason, no business bein in? It was just my love for all of them that made me keep goin to get them and tryin to show them the right way. And it was like "Ok, you got three and a half years in prison." Here she is pregnant. So instead of them sendin her to jail they send her a drug place in Clearwater. So she went there, she had her baby.

So my mumma went and got the baby and she stayed in drug rehab and she got straight. Now she pregnant again. She not doin drugs. She got a clear head now. She got her kids. She takin care of them now. And she told me that she was sorry that she was never a big sister to me; I always had to be their big sister. And I said "Ok, you want to make it up? Only thing I ask you to do is to take care of your kids."

She wanted me to take her place and I asked her, "Well, if you talkin about goin to the ghetto you better walk back there 'cause I'm not goin back there. So she said "No." I don't want to go back down there, because only thing I'm a do this year is to stay with my family and not let the bad company that she used to keep come around her no more. I said "Ok, well show me that you mean it." She aint touched a drug since she been out. Seventh months she aint touched no drugs. And she mind the other nieces and nephews from my other sister, and she stay home and watch TV.

[The father of the kids] left my sister when they first got married and he said he was comin back for them and he never came back. She never seen her husband in 8 and a half years. So the kids don't know they father. All the kids think my husband is they daddy, but it's not. [He] love 'em all.

Well, he put up with it. I remember my husband did some bad things to me because of my family, and I told him he couldn't blame my family for what he done. And he kinda figure "Well, that's the escape route I'll take 'cause Michelle don't know the difference no way." And it was like "No, you can't blame it on my family 'cause you did that because you wanted to do it." Bad things like cheatin on me, lyin to me, goin out every night, and I stay home and mind my children. And [he's] like "I'm gonna leave you because of your mumma and them, and everywhere I go they tellin me about your brother and your sister." I said "Well

leave. If you want to leave, there's the door. Pack your clothes and go. It's not no strain, 'cause I can mind my kids. I been mumma and daddy for them for two and a half years anyway, so what's gonna make the difference?"

[He said] "Oh babe, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." I say "Oh, now your sorry? You should think about that when you tell me these things." I'm not puttin up with it no more, because God done fixed it. I'm gettin back up on my feet, I'm goin to school. I'm a get me a job and I'm a take care of me and my children. And if you want us to take care of you we'll take care of you, too. Now that's up to you." He sorry for what he did in the past. So I don't throw it up in his face. I kinda feel let bygones be bygones. I got over it. And when he go out I don't be jealous no more, or if he talk to somebody I don't worry about it.

Now I [trust him] but eight years ago I didn't. And that's sad to say but I didn't. I learned to trust him, throughout everything that happened. Oh, [now] he's very happy with me. Every time you turn around people stop you. They say "I know your wife goin to school" and he say "Yeah, and I'm so proud of her." And I told him today, "Well, I soon get me a job you know" and he said "Well, where you gonna be workin? Are we still gonna have lunch?" But he's real happy about everything that I'm doin.

My mumma she's fine. She stay home with my sister and they crochet and watch TV together. So I just gotta ask god to keep her in the house 'cause sometimes she goes astray on me. I'll fuss her out to make her see what she did wrong. She always blamed my daddy for when he left. 'Cause one time my daddy packed up and he moved out and moved in with another woman, and she always blamed me that my daddy had another girlfriend and I didn't tell her. I said "Well, that's his business. We all grown now." And my daddy lived with another woman for three and a half years, and then he moved back with my mumma when he see she was on drugs and doin all those bad things. The family got back together.

It's like it's one now... and everybody's happy. And we all see one another. Every day the kids get together. That's the only thing I think about is the children. Kids are important to everybody, and I think everybody should have an interest in the kids. In the community, they should have something for the kids, places for them, little things they can learn, recreational things and activities. I got my kids involved in this group that and they gonna teach the kids manner and obedience and gonna give 'em a curfew,

certain times that they have to be home, to be part of the group. But it'll give other kids something to do too than seein people sellin drugs and gettin high.

If I was the judge and executioner I would get all these people because I don't think that should be around little children. I feel kinda bad when my little nephew had to ask me "Auntie, where's my mumma? Someone said my mumma in prison." And I said "Yeah, your mumma went to prison 'cause she did something bad" and he started cryin and he said "Auntie, could you hold me?" and I hold him and I set him down and I explained to him. I used to sit all the kids down and make them write my sister in prison, and we used to write on a long piece of paper and we was the only ones that kept [her] goin, 'cause she told us about the people gettin killed in prison, people hangin theyself. She even had nightmares when she came home from prison, about all the bad things.

And we had a workshop at school, when [the counselor] asked about drugs. I didn't want to come out and just tell everybody. I had to think about how I was gonna say it, because when you mention drugs to me I get very bitter, and I think about what my family went through. And my husband say it's supposed to be personal, but when you mention drugs to me I get very upset because first thing I'm thinkin of, my family goin back down there to do that again. They're not with it now, and I just thank God he answerin, "Oh please, make mumma stop goin back there." That's why I don't come down here, back there in town, I don't come because it aint no place I want to be.

And my kids, even when I think about the man rapin the kids where we live, he raped a little 8 and 9 year old girl back then. I have a 9 and a half year old daughter and a 6 and a half year old, and I'm just lucky it wasn't my child. But my kids they stay inside. We read books, we play games in the house. Once we get home we go straight in the house and we lock the door till [my husband] come home. I don't let my kids roam the street. I see a lot of little children mothers, they just don't care about the children. But my kids not goin without me.

I feel they need a little more manners because I try to do the best I can with 'em and show 'em the right way. I think I'm a good role model for 'em 'cause I used to look at my mumma--it's like "Oh no, I don't want to be like her." That's a bad thing to say about your mumma but that's how I felt. I had to live my life and do it the right way,

knowin how I was brought up, how my mumma used to struggle every day to feed six children and make sure we have clothes and stuff. 'Cause everything we had was used. We never had nothin new, and with my kids we have everything new now. And whatever mumma need like I said I go get it. If she want food I buy her food.

I still love her. I used to go to group meetins for [the drug rehab program.] I used to go to them groups for support for me, 'cause my sister was usin and brother and all them. And when they start talkin about drugs I almost broke down and start cryin in front of everybody but I didn't, 'cause I'm not gonna let it get to me. And I went to the drug meetin for the first time when she first went 'cause she went twice and ended up doin the same thing. I was so angry that she didn't want to take care of her children and she didn't want to be a mother the right way. And only thing I want her to do is be a good ma, how we was brought up and seein how mumma was drinkin. Like my mumma life it was like bitter, 'cause my mumma never talk about her childhood to us.

I remember when I asked her, "Well mumma, I want you to tell me the truth. Who my daddy?" and she said "I don't want to talk about that. Don't you even bring that up" and she got very angry. And today I still don't have my birth certificate, and my husband said "Well you 27 years old. What if I want to take you out the country, to a different place? You can't go 'cause you don't have that paper." And it's like "Oh just forget about it" 'cause my stepfather, he like took me when I was like 7 days old and he been with my mumma for 29 years now and that's the only father that I know. I wouldn't trade him for nothin in the world, 'cause any time I get sick it's always "I want my daddy" or "Daddy, please help me." You know, he's always there for me when I'm sick. And anything I need he's always there.

I went to a funeral last March when my cousin died. It was a sad funeral 'cause I was very close to my cousin. And when I had to go up to the casket to go see him my daddy had to walk me up. And I looked down on my cousin, and I went to touch him and I said "Oh God, daddy, please don't ever leave me. No, before you die, let me die first because you a good daddy" and he hugged me and said "Babe, don't worry about that right now because one day we all gotta go." It took me about 4 hours to calm down after the funeral because I wanted was my father to stay there. I wanted him in my eyesight where I could see him.

Now I call my daddy every day at his job. I go to this house every day to go see him in person. I'm married but I still go home to my mumma and daddy and get in the bed and watch tv, just like I'm still there. To me aint nothin gonna change with my parents, 'cause I'll always still be they little girl. I love them. I love them a lot.

Many a time I used to tell my mother, "Look, either you get it together or we might as well just commit you to the hospital." And she say "You can't just commit me like that because I haven't did anything. I can control my drug habit." I said "Well y'all sure can't control your drug habit, because y'all be gone for three, four, nine, ten days, and y'all don't care if the kids eat, bathe or not sleep. I have to be there. I have to have my husband come and he would have to buy diapers and milk and food, actual food for these other kids, kids that wasn't mines." My husband still feed 'em 'cause the kids didn't ask to be born, and I felt well, we gotta try and help the children. And Lawrence went along with it, you know. He helped me with the kids. He bought stuff. He disciplined them as they was his own. And I did the same thing too.

The reason why they said they did it is because my father left my mother, and blamin my father for my mother's problems. You can't blame other people for your problems. They're your own problems and you should be able to deal with it, because I deal with all my problems. I could look at you today and you can't even tell is something wrong with Alona. If I don't break down and say "Well, you know this and that" you would never know that it's something bothering me. 'Cause I learned how to deal with my problems. Like I said, watching my mother and my father fight and it taught me how to control my feelings. Even though it hurts I would still not say nothing.

And a lot of people say, "I didn't know you went through all of this with your husband. I never thought he was that type of person." And I say "Yeah, he was like that but he tries to make it up to me. I married him for better or for worse. And I always own up to that vow." [My husband] feel I don't love him because he said when he talk to me it's like I don't want to listen to him and I don't want to do what he say do, and that's wrong. Maybe it's wrong but I do love him deep down inside my heart. I really love him. Last night we was talkin, 'cause all this week we didn't talk and we always fuss. He always was fussin. So I got to the point where I didn't want to hear it so I went in the room and laid in my bed. Because I would get tired

of him fussin at me for little things. Like "Pour some water in the fish tank! Pick up the paper!" I get tired of doing these things too.

Why don't you pick up somethin?" 'Cause I have to go pick up my kids, make breakfast in the morning, make dinner, make lunch. And I get tired. Sittin up here all day with the computer. I feel when I get home the only thing I want to do is sleep. I get up 6:00 every morning. Seven days a week. Michelle get tired too, you know. And my sister approached me this morning. "Oh yeah, I'm living with Rhonda. What you think I should do? You think I should buy some steaks or you think I should not buy nothing?" And I looked at her and I said "Well, hey. You livin there. You grown. You over 21. You should be able to make your own decisions because after all, Rhonda givin you someplace to stay." And she say "Yeah, that's true." And this is the oldest sister talkin like she five or six years old now, and I'm the second oldest. And here it is, like I say I have all my family responsibilities on me.

I sure would like to know. I guess it's 'cause I'm kind hearted and I always worry about what's going on. And I see things in a different way, with my family. Yesterday my brother called to tell me "Oh, I'm out a jail. You think y'all could get together \$200 so I could pay my restitution?" And I said to him, "What you say? Send you \$200? Were you work? I'm tired of giving you, and we not getting nothin in return but a bunch of heartaches." Especially me. 'Cause me and my husband fuss all this week 'cause I went runnin down there to tell my mumma my brother called and he want money to come home. My husband say, "I hope you can run for me when I ask you to do things."

I know he's feeling, like he's being neglected, 'cause I always put my family before him. He always tell me that. "Well, you run for your family but when I ask you to do things, you never want to do it." And I don't know what to say. I got up and I started cleaning up the whole house, washing up all the dishes, mop the floor, go wash the clothes, go hang up, so I don't have to hear what he got to say. But then reality hits me when I go to bed, and he fold his arms and don't want me to touch him. And I said "Well hey, either you want me to touch you or I'm gonna sleep on the couch. What's it gonna be?" "Well, you didn't care about that when you did it." And then he like telling me I always end up in the wrong places at the wrong time.

This week we went fishing. And [my husband] said he was gonna go fishin, but he never came home. So me and my brother-in-law went fishin. And when [my husband] came out to the fishin pier, me and my brother-in-law had just got there. And I had just set down the bag of ice when Lawrence came up. He said "Well, how long y'all been out here?" I said "We just got here." And then he said "Well, this shit don't look right, you bein out here with him." I said "Well, what you gonna give me him to screw? No, no, no. You don't do that to me, because I do not go no where and I don't have no other mens in my life, and if you tryin to give me somebody, that's the wrong thing you can ever do. Why should I have somebody when I got you?" That's what I told him. And "Oh babe, I'm sorry." "I don't want to hear 'I'm sorry.' You shouldn't be sayin it" because to me I feel that makes a person go do it. When you try to, accuse a person of something, you makes 'em go do what they bein accused of. I'm not the type of person.

I was just hurt that he said it. Ten, going on eleven years now, listening to Lawrence shit, puttin up with it, you know. I put up with it, all the hurts, all the pains, all the heartaches. But we still together. There was times when I just felt like givin up, but I didn't, 'cause I always remember my oath to him. I married him for better or worse. And it got down to the worst parts. Believe me it did. I could overcome it now. I don't fuss with him like I used to and want to fight him. I would snap back at him, but I don't do it no more, because it's like I'm over it. Nothing you say can hurt me, make me feel bad no more, 'cause I'm trying to help myself.

He's there, and he support me, but then again he want to be snappy about it. He want to fuss all the time to let me see "Oh, it was wrong for you to do this and wrong for you to do that." And he feel I'm always helpin my family, and he don't like that. Well, I can understand him, but then again I want my family to be a family. I want them to be brothers and sisters and mumma and daddy. I want everybody to be as one. And if I don't keep gettin on them and tellin them this is wrong and you not supposed to do things that way, they would never listen. And it's like I'm the leader of the family. I'm the one that's really gotta put out for them, 'cause my mother didn't treat us like a mother was supposed to treat children. She would go drink and play bingo and leave us there. I had to cook when I was eight years old.

I learned how to cook when I was eight years old. I would go in there, cook rice, prepare pork chops, beans or whatever and feed my other four sisters and brothers. And my older sister would make sure the house get clean. My little sister would have to wash the dishes, and my brothers would have to cut the yard and keep the yard clean, 'cause my mother and daddy wasn't really there. We had to raise ourselves. [My dad] was always workin and always gone. And my mumma would always go to bingo or she go drinkin. And I guess that's what led on after these few years to her usin drugs.

We from Key West, and everywhere I go it's like "Your mother down here or your sister down here or your brother." Sometime it just makes me mad where that smokin goin on. Like the other night I said "Oh yeah baby, y'all won't be able to smoke no more, 'cause they got the dogs to sniff out the drugs downtown. You won't go smokin no more 'cause once the dogs smell it, you goin to jail. You goin to prison. [My mother] never got into trouble. Just my brother and my sister.

[My brother] was in trouble for attempted rape 'cause the girl 17 and he 21. But come to find out the girl gave it to him and she was late gettin home, so the mother says she was raped. But they let him go. They let him go, 'cause he didn't really raped her. She gave it to him, 'cause I asked him yesterday. I said "What you went there for? They locked you back up. You was in your happy hunting grounds, huh? You felt happy?" This my baby brother I'm talkin about. And I said "Well, tell me what happened? I'm waitin to hear it?" So he broke down and he told it to me. And I said "Well, you better learn to keep your alligator at home and leave them girls alone."

[He been] in trouble before for smokin crack. Sales and possession. He been to prison for nine months. He went to prison in Miami. And when he got out, his girlfriend told him to come to Duval county, and that's where he went to live. And he got off probation and was cleared. He didn't have to do no more time or nothin. Then he met this girl and she and him went on a little ride and he told her either she put up or get out. She put up and he said he came home at 3:00 in the morning, and she knew he did something but she didn't know what. And when the police came knockin on the door, they asked him did he have sex with her? And he said yeah. He didn't deny it. So they took him to jail, but they let him go 'cause they didn't have enough to say that it was forced entry or nothin.

I don't know. I think I should teach him a lesson, again because I don't think he learned. God knows I never been in my life, but I think if I ever go to jail I'd never want to go back. After they told me what happened in jail. My sister say this lady killed this 'nother woman. I don't think I ever want to go to jail, 'cause I can't be seeing myself be locked up like a dog. And it's like you got to press on the glass and say "Oh, I love you and thank you for coming." 'Cause it's bad. They talk about how people get raped and they do all kind a bad things. I hope I never go. I just, keep lookin on the bright side and keep doin what I'm doin so I don't have to go.

My oldest brother works at [the tire shop] and he gonna be 24 years old. He married to an Australian woman and they about to have a baby. One time my brother got in trouble I can remember. It's when he was riding his bike and he was 16. And these gay couple was on the sidewalk, and the gay man kicked his bike and made him fell and he got up and he punched the gay man and broke the man jaw. And I remember sitting behind him and the judge asked him do he go to school and he answered yes. Do he work? He answered yes. They gave him 90 days in jail, and he didn't spend the whole 90 days though. He spent a month in there because he was working and going to school and they dropped all the charges and gave him a clean record.

So they tell me they problems and I listen. Just like when my momma be in bed, my daddy come running to me tellin me "Oh babe, your mamma down the street somewhere and she don't want to come home, this and that." I go down and get her 'cause that's my mumma. I don't feel no mamma should be out on the corner doing those bad things, especially not my mumma. I don't be bad, I don't think she should be bad. She should be tryin to set a good example for us. That's what she should be doin, especially her grandkids. Because this boy told me, he say "We not gonna call your mumma 'moms' no more. We gonna call her grandma dynamite. " He say "Yeah, I'm a call your mumma that because your mumma is a bad mumma." I said "What you mean?" He said "Yeah, 'cause she about to blow any minute. Grandma dynamite."

Well, I'll go find her, and when I find her I put her in the car and I tell her "Let's go right now. If you don't come I'm a go to daddy job and I'm a bring him right where you at." And boy she get pissed off, and I don't care if she do get mad. Sometime I have to say things to hurt my mumma for her to realize what she doin is wrong. I know a couple of times I talked real bad to my mumma and it was

like, it hurted me but I had to do it, I had to force her back. I don't feel like givin up 'cause if I give up they all gonna give up, and I don't want 'em to give up. I want them to see what they doin is wrong. I pray to God that day comes soon that she give it all up, because that's nothing for a mother to be doin.

In October, she had to go in the hospital 'cause she had a heart attack. I thought that would make her stop smokin, and I said "Well, what you want? You want us to scrape you up off the sidewalk next? I scrape you up off the sidewalk and put you in a brown bag, you know what that mean? Gone. You gotta passage way out the world. That what you want?" It's like "Oh, how could you say something like that? I'm your mother." They be like zombies. They be in a different state of mind. You really have to see what a crack person does. It's the awfulest thing you ever want to see, 'cause it's like they just starin at you. "Oh, do you got any money? You got a couple a dollars?" And it's like "No, I don't have no money for that. If you want to eat, I'll feed you. But I'm not gonna give you my money." I mean it's horrible.

You don't take care of yourself. And it's like "Oh gosh, look at my mother." 'Cause I tell her, "Well mumma, where's your bra?" You're a woman. You're supposed to have on." "Oh, just a tee shirt, a pair of shorts and two slippers and I'll be good to go." I really felt embarrassed a couple of weeks ago. I had a card game over to my house. It was a fundraiser for my daughter. And my mother popped up. I had all these important people over to my house. And I was talkin and the lady kept lookin, so I turned round to see who the lady was lookin at. And here come my mumma through my back yard. And she had on a shirt, a pair of shorts and she looked dirty! And my husband put his hand on his head and put his head down. I'll just try to keep talkin to the lady so I don't have to look at my mumma looking so disgustin.

The lady went home, and then I told my mumma, "Hey, let me tell you something. Look at your damn head. Look at these dirty ass clothes you got on. What's wrong with you?" I told this to my own mother now. And that's no way to talk to your mother. She didn't know that I even said it. [She was] zombie-like. And the next day "Oh, you got some soup? You got something?" "Yeah mumma, I'll feed you. What you need?" I feed her. And then when she gets sober, I'll go off on her, because I say "You embarrass me real bad, you know? How could you do something like that to me?"

[My kids] just think grandma sick. Ever since they see her in the hospital layin up there, they just think she sick. But my oldest daughter talk about drugs. She talk about it because they show her films about it in school, and one day she was petitioning about people to say no to drugs. And one lady got nasty with her. "I don't want to sign your paper." And she started cryin. My sister told her, "Don't cry because the lady usin drugs. That's why she didn't want to sign it." She said "I wish I was a policeman, and then I could just put all of them drug people in jail."

My oldest daughter is very alert. She's very aware about what's going on. My oldest daughter used to write my oldest sister in prison. Even when I couldn't pick up the pencil, my nine year old daughter would pick up the pencil and write her. "And mumma, could you please mail this to Auntie Emmie?" And I say "Okay, I'll mail it to her."

[My sister's] children live with my mother and father, and now she give you anything you need. But only God knows how long it'll keep up. I was tellin them last night, "Look, I'm a get me a job soon and I'm gonna get to the point where I'm not gonna worry about the family so much like I do. I'm gonna go somewhere where my mind can be occupied. I'll have things to do, and I'll see different people every day. And where I won't have to think about all my family problems." It hurts down inside. It really hurts me a lot. Just talkin about it and bringing back up all them bad memories.

[My friends] wasn't all married. I guess it was just me that got married. I thought get married where we'll just be together, but I didn't realize being married is really a big responsibility, and I learned that. I told him a couple of months ago, "I think I growed a lot because when I married you I was 17 years old. And at this present time I'm 27, and I think I learned a lot being married." What's the responsibilities, how to take care of a child, how to cook and clean up. I already knew that. When we had to raise ourselves. I knew how to do that. That was no problem. And like he make a joke every now and then. "Well, my wife already done came made, 'cause she knew how to cook."

I did tell him I didn't want to get married, because I could still go to school and have my baby, and me and my

baby could live happily ever after. And he said "Oh no. I got see my baby be brought up." I'm tired of askin. I want you to marry me." So I said "I don't care. Let's just do it and get it over with." And it was like after I got married, my whole life changed. I feel if I could do it all over again, I would do it all over again. But it would be some things I'd want to change in my marriage.

If I could already have my high school diploma, I would a waited till I got that. 'Cause my husband talk about "You know I got all these bills and you don't do nothing to help me." It was like I can't take it. He said "You know, I'm the only one working and it's hard to support this family because there's a whole bunch of bills, bills this, bills that." I'm tired of hearing it. "It won't be long now 'cause I'll be gettin my own job where I could help you with the bills and we could raise our kids, and maybe you'll stop being so uptight." I can kind of understand how he feel, goin to work 7 days a week. So that's why I try not to fuss with him, and let him just say what he want. But one day it'll probably get to the point where we don't have to fuss at all, to where everything can be peaceful. And just maybe God will turn it around that I listen to him more.

But sometime he say things that is hurtful that I don't want to hear. 'Cause when he talk about "Well, I should leave. I'm only here for the kids' sake" and sometime he tell me these things and it's like I won't say nothin. And my mind be tellin me well, tell him just leave. But then again I say no. If I say that that might cause a problem. I really love [my husband] and I don't want him to leave. I feel me and him made these kids, we should be able to take care of these kids. I think he [feel the same] but then again, my husband got like a split personality. One minute he'll be fine and the next minute he'll be a bitch.

I remember one time my sister came from Germany. Me and him was havin a fuss, and he wanted to hit me. My little sister jumped in and she said "No, you don't be hittin on my sister, 'cause my daddy aint never slapped my sister." One time he slapped me and I cut him with the knife, and told him, "Look. Don't you never do that, 'cause my own daddy never slapped me across my face." We got over that. That hasn't happened to me in about 8 years now. But to raise his hand and hit me, he won't do that no more. He'll blow up like he want to hit me but he don't do it. But I'll get to the point where I don't want to listen, don't want to hear anything.

I do feel like runnin away from time to time, especially when me and my husband goin at it. I tell him, "No. I'm leaving you and I'm takin my kids." And he say "Oh no you're not. You're not takin my children away from me. I kill you if you ever take my children." I say "Yeah, well you just have to kill me"

[My husband] got more education than I do. And it's like I'm on this low grade, with communication, with people and he's so advanced. His sister's a school teacher and he come from this middle class family where they all, own they own houses. And when he talk to me, my husband would treat other people better than he would treat me. And when I approach him with it, he be ready to hit the wall. He said "Well, why do you say that?" 'Cause I just get to the point where I sit down and I look at him. When we're around people I won't say nothin.

I remember when my girlfriend scratch my car and I never wrecked my car, and she was drinkin. And I was just sittin on the porch watchin everybody drink and she drove up in the parking lot and she scratched my car. And I felt hurt because my husband never bought me a car. My granddaddy had to buy my car for me. I felt hurt 'cause that was my pride, my car. And then she gonna git in my face and tell me how she didn't do it. And I got so mad with her.

So my husband said "Just forget about it. It's just a little scratch." I said "No. I'm not gonna forget about it, 'cause I paid \$350 to get my car repainted already, and I can't just forget about that." It was like he was takin Donna side, instead of him sayin "Well you scratch my wife car. You should talk about this tomorrow real calm, because you drunk right now, okay?" And when I approached him about how he took Donna side over me, he got pissed off and said "Well fuck you." And I said "No, no, no. You don't tell me nothin like that. What it is, your guilt?" I can always tell when he guilty, 'cause he would say bad things to me. And that's how I knew he did whatever I say he did.

And he start tellin me "Well, how many fuckin times I tell you to put water in that fish tank? Did you ever do it? Did you ever do it? How many months?" I said "Well Lawrence, you could a poured the water in there just like I could a." "Oh, so now you gettin smart." You know, I'm human too, you know. Oh, 'cause he go to work he feel he shouldn't have to do this. I should be able to do this. I

go to school. That's just as good as work, you know? But he don't look at it that way.

He don't ever be home to take care of them. I always have to do it. And you know when I tell my kids, "Well, I'm leaving your daddy. Who you wanta go with, your mumma or your daddy?" They always pick their mother. And my oldest daughter, one time I thought my daughter was havin a mental problem too, because I had went to mental health a couple of years ago, about two years ago after my husband was doin all these bad things to me, and I couldn't deal with it. And I don't know if it was makin my nerves bad with my sickness. I couldn't figure out what it was. But when I left for them two and a half weeks and went to Savannah, I felt much better, you know that?

We went up, and I called him from Savannah a week later, and I told him. I said "We not comin back." And he said "What you mean you're not coming back? You better get back here." I said "Go on, tell your daddy you like it here." And she said "Daddy, Savannah is very pretty and you could come up here and live with us." And he was pissed off 'cause he thought I wasn't comin back for good. But then again, it was like gettin away from him. It wasn't no pressure from him fussin at me, tellin me do this and do that and this is not right.

When he want to go out, I used to want to fight him and fuss him, but I don't. I'll sit there, I'll iron his clothes for him and let him go. And whenever he come back he'll meet me and my kids piled up in my bed, and we'll all be sleepin. I don't worry about what time he come back no more. I used to, but now I don't. I used to be jealous, and the first time he hurt me, he ran away with my best friend, and he went to Pensacola, and he left me for 14 days and 14 nights with my baby. When he came back two weeks late he asked me for a divorce. He had the sheriff people to come up to the house where we used to live.

I went downtown and I got me a lawyer. We went to court, and the whole two weeks before we went to court, Lawrence would sleep in the same bed with me. We would make love, I would cook and clean up this house, and it was like, nothing wrong with us. But when the time come to go get the divorce, he had his lawyer and I had mines.

I like could write a letter now. I never could a writed a letter to my friends, I always had to call them on the phone because I couldn't write them. And they always asked "Well why you don't never write?" I never wrote a letter until a couple of weeks ago. It feels good; I could now put my thoughts together like what I want to say to a person. Because one time before when I tried writin, I never got to how are you doing, none of that stuff and the period and the question mark, and all those other things that goes in a letter. I couldn't do it because I never had the interest in doing it. But now I write my girlfriend a letter and I wrote my aunt in New York.

Well, my husband always tell me that I never could understand, what goes on. I always said I did but I didn't. I always said "I understand what you said" but I didn't. It was just to shut him up because he fuss for little things, and I can't take it. I [got] married when I was going on 17. And he told me it didn't matter to him if I couldn't read or I couldn't write. He wanted us to be married and have our baby and be husband and wife. And I told him I wanted to have my baby and go back, and stay in school. But having the baby changed everything because it's the baby needed more time, and I always spend time with my kids. And it's like the last 11 years that's all I did, being a home maker, raising my three kids.

I had wanted to be a seamstress, 'cause I used to like home ec class a lot. I just wanted to make clothes and see different places one day. And the first time I ever got to go somewhere was to the Virgin Islands, and I went to Savannah, Georgia. Those are the only two different places that I ever been besides Key West.

Sometime I feel like [my husband] always tries to run the show but it's like. "I'm equal. I'm the same as you so why should you treat me like I'm five or six years old. I don't want to hear it." Now last night we got into it again, because he gonna tell me "Well, your first priority and your first job is here at the house." And he said "You better worry about home first before you talking about doing something else." And it's like well, here's the negative thought again. And I just like blocked it out. Now lunch time I went home today. He's still not talking to me. He's looking at the house and telling me "Well, why don't you worry about straightening up this house and gettin dinner cooked?"

I feel I'm a still have to cook and clean up because he don't know how to cook. I'm a still have to go home from work and cook dinner for my kids and him. So it's not really that I'm neglecting home. It's just that he rather for me to be home and I don't want to be home.

I'm a go to night school, to the High School. They got a program there that I can still go to, and that's what I already done set my mind on doing. Like if the job come before I got time to retake [the GED test], I'm a retake it and if I don't pass it I'm a still go to night school to try to pass it. I'm not gonna give up 'cause I worked real hard to try to get here. So I'm not gonna give up 'cause it'd be a waste on my behalf. I'm not wastin no more years. I got to look on the bright side of things, and this is something I wanted to do and I'm gonna stick to it. I'll pass the GED. I'm not worried about it 'cause I'm gonna buy the book and I'm gonna still come to class every day. I'll get it one way or the other, I'll get it.

I'm on the way to help myself and to go back into the job world, I'll be able to take care of me and my kids by myself to where I won't have to depend on [my husband] like I do. I went to the credit union yesterday because I learned to do without a lot of things that a person should have, like going out buy yourself something new, new clothes. You know what I do with my money? I saved my money in my Bible. Yesterday, I went home and I got the \$80 out the Bible and the \$20 a week that [my husband] gives me." I took \$60 to the bank, \$10 for gas and \$10 to eat lunch.

And it's like things hurts me because he don't appreciate me, because he feel I can't read and I can't write, and I don't understand. And I'm not puttin up with it no more, 'cause I know I am someone. And he make me feel like I'm not. To me I feel by him yellin at me and throwin his fits to where he want to hit me all the time, I'm over that. 'Cause it was like he always wanted things his way. Now I got to the point were I started fighting him back too. So me and him went a few rounds. Of course he won but I still got mines in too.

Eight years now since we fight; I'm not goin back through that no more, 'cause my kids are gettin older and I'm getting older. I feel we need a decent place to live and my kids needs to be raised in a loving family. Well I'm hopin things are gonna get better between me and him, to where we can go out and buy us a house and a place that we can call our own to raise our kids. I'm learnin to do

without a lot of things a woman should have. And I take my money to the bank, and I got \$110 in the bank and I'm not gonna bother the \$110 because I feel when I go to work I could put away \$50 a week to where I could save up enough money to buy me somethin. And like I told my sister, "I'm thinkin on the positive side of things now. All the bad things don't really matter no more."

I'm a put something away for me and my children. I got to think about a foundation for me and my kids." Lawrence is not promised to me. It aint no must that he gotta stay with me. I gotta think about what if he pack up tonight or today and leave us. Where am I gonna go from there? I already done let him win for the last nine years. I'm not gonna let him win no more. It's my time to win.

Postscript

Michelle completed the program before our last interview. She was certified by the training agent who gave her a particularly difficult time in the process. She was ill that day and had had a nightmare that he through her out of the Learning Center because she couldn't spell "technique." At one point in the process, she had broken down and was crying because she couldn't do an exercise that called for explaining abbreviations in classified ads. When I asked her if she wanted to postpone the process, she said that she wanted to go on and be done. And so she finished and graduated.

She is working for the school department as a bus driver's aide. She works split shifts and so she has a bulk of time in the middle of the day when she is off. On her own, she found a job as a child care giver in a local private facility. She is trying save money to buy her own car. Her husband is helping out with the care of their own children. Michelle did not pass the GED test. Her score was relatively low and she is attending night classes at the high school to re-take the test in April.

At the completion of the last interview, Michelle explained that something very disturbing had happened to her on the way to the Learning Center that morning. She drove by a dirty, disheveled woman that she said "looked out of it" and when she got past the woman and looked in the rear view mirror she realized it was her mother. She was surprised at herself because when she realized who it was, she still didn't stop the car. Michelle went on to

explain that her mother had been gone for the last five days and the family expected that she had fallen back on crack and was living in the streets again. Right now Michelle is trying desperately to balance her feelings of responsibility toward her family, especially her mother and husband, with her need to establish her own sense of self and to create a better life for herself and her family.

James Freeman

James is a 55 year old Black man who relocated to Key West 20 years ago. He is widowed from a first marriage and has two grown children. He is currently helping to raise a second family. His wife works full-time and he is primarily responsible for the care of his two children. James did not know how to read or write when he came to the Learning Center. He has been attending class for over a year. James was not part of the On-the-Job-Training Program.

"What brought you to the Learning Center?"

I went to the Catholic School to see if I could find a tutor. And they find me the tutor that I have now. So she was helpin me find some kinda job that I could do, 'cause I have a bad back. I asked her about this school over here and she said "Oh yes, that's a good idea. I will check on that for you and when you come back next week I'll let you know something." And the next week when I went back, she told me, "Yes, you can start over there."

I can't do the kind of work I used to do. That's why I got to try to get a little bit of schoolin. I used to do a lot of construction. I used to lay pipe, carpenter helper, brick mason helper and plaster work, painting buildings and stuff like that. And I also used to do a lot of shrimping. [And] I have surgery on my lower back. I hurt it and I had the surgery in '74 and, after that surgery I went back to work, start doing the same type of work. And I hurt it again. I think about three weeks later I was takin a shower one morning and I feel a knot and I said what is this? I went [to the doctor] and he he check it out. I went into the hospital the next day and he said "I think it could be a tumor." Eventually he went in there and that's what it was.

After the surgery, I went back to work, start doin the same type of work. My back was doin excellent. It feel excellent. And one day it start hurtin me. And now it seems like it's painful all the time. I have now goin on two years now since it start gettin worse. I was takin physical therapy and it wasn't helpin me none. So [the doctor] arranged to send me up to Baptist Hospital in the pain center. Well, they have a group of people with chronic pains: back, leg, head, and we all get together and talk with one another. They can't cure your pain but they learn

you how to deals with it if you want. So you get support from one another to let you see you's not the only one going through the same thing.

They teach you how to relax with it and to keep your mind off of it, try to stay busy doing something. [That's why I decided to come to school] to keep my mind active and at the same time learn something. One day even if I return back to work I wouldn't be able to be doin these type of work I been doin, but maybe I could find somethin I could do. I could take a piece of paper and I could read what they sayin.

Scenes from a life.

All my life I work hard. My first marriage, I put two kids through school. I got a son, he's an architect, he draws. And my oldest daughter, she's a nurse in Philadelphia. So I work hard, 'cause when they mother died they was young. She had a bad heart. My son, him and John Kennedy's son the same age. My first wife, her mother and her sisters, all them pitch in and raised the kids. All I did was work. Sometimes I worked two jobs.

I was in Tampa then and I was workin to the shipyard. I used to work 12 hours a day. They used to have swing shifts, sand blast the ship, clean up ship, and I used to do that. I put them through school and I didn't have no schoolin but thank god I put them through it.

I see I was right. 'Cause I could a gotten married again early but I put that aside. I was young, a lot younger than I am now, so I had a lot of time. I'll get married later. Right now I got to tend to these, 'cause you get married again and your wife might not treat your kids right. It would be a marriage that wouldn't work or something. I wouldn't want nobody to mistreat my kids. So I just stayed away from that. If I tell you that didn't enter my mind I wouldn't be tellin the truth. [Gettin remarried] entered my mind many times but at the same time, I look at my two kids and I figured I love them enough to outweigh the marriage.

Well the girl was was almost four and the boy, he wasn't quite two. They didn't know anything about their mother. What we did we take pictures of her. She had a lot of pictures before she died. After she died I took them to the funeral home, and I took a lot of pictures. And during

the funeral I take a lot of pictures. When they growed up they had pictures.

I think my daughter been about five and a half, six years old, and she asked for her mother. She didn't ask me, she asked her grandmother who was her mother, and she told [her]. Then she came home and asked me, "My mother died?" I said "Yes, your mother died." And later on coming on up, she was gettin bigger. It [was] still a hard pill for she to follow, 'cause my wife had three sisters. All of 'em's married and they wouldn't leave my kids out but still she didn't tell nobody anything but she felt that her mother wasn't there. I could sensed that myself sometime. But they made it through it alright. I think by me stickin with them and talk with them and they had good grandparents, aunt and great grandparents, and I think that what they bring them up right. But I think I played a key role in it.

I love my kids I have now but my kids then, I was more closer to them; they didn't have a mother. I was real close to them. Sometime when I get up from work I'd go and get them and we would just go different places. I put in a lot of time with them, and it seemed like I couldn't do enough for them. 'Cause I was trying to make up for mother.

I feel very satisfied. It take a long time for me after her death. I just didn't let that get in between taking care of the kids. The last time, [they had to] be rushin with the oxygen [because] of her heart, spent all kind of money. Didn't do any good. So one day the doctor had wanted to see me. I goes to the hospital and she don't look like a person sick or anything. She want to know how the kids is and stuff like that, 'cause during that time you couldn't take the kids in the room. Said "The kids is doing fine. They worried about you, how you feelin?" So she said "I doin alright." This was the last time she went into the hospital. I used to be so tired I just used to lay around the side of the bed, 'cause I used to go home and take my bath before I go to the hospital.

And she told me, I'll never forget these words. She said "This time I'm not comin back home alive." Well, the doctor told me first. He said "Don't expect a miracle 'cause that is what it will have to be 'cause your wife heart is so bad." And he told me "Fact about it, she had gone this morning but someone revive her, bring her back." He said "Now any time, I just wanted you to know that..."

And when he told me that he hadn't told her anything, it seemed like somebody had just stuck a knife into me, and my mind went right on my kids. So I went into the room, and talked with her. Acted like it aint nothin. She said "James, I'm not coming back home alive." I said "Well why you want to say that?" She said "I'm tellin you the fact 'cause I want you to know. I'm not coming back home alive. I want you to promise me something." She said "I want you to promise me you'll never put no woman over my kids" I guess she thought I would get married again. I said "Well, I don't believe you going to die now, but that's something you won't have to worry about if something should happen." And I didn't.

Well, she told me that on a Wednesday afternoon, and Sunday about 4:00 she passed through. The kids was down to they grandmother house. I was home layin on the settee sleepin. Then somebody come knockin on the door, 'cause all the family has done went to the hospital. Somebody come knock at the door, one of the neighbor, and he said, "Your mother-in-law called. You must come up to the hospital quickly. Your wife has taken sicker." So I got up and I ran and I jump in the car. I just didn't think. When I got to the hospital, I see everybody with tears in they eyes. I know then she had gone. When I went into the room they had her wrapped up. I just unwrapped the sheet and looked at her. Those things I'll never forget.

God has blessed me 'cause if I didn't have my mother-in-law, a grandmother-in-law and her sisters, I woulda had a harder time, a lot harder time, 'cause I would a had to get somebody to keep them or take them someplace. But God had blessed me then. I didn't have to worry 'bout them. I knew they was alright. When my wife died I think I been about 22 or 23, 'cause I married young. But we was goin together for maybe a year and a half before we got married. After she got pregnant we got married. It seemed like everything was going alright in the home. Nobody wanted for nothin 'cause like I said I keep the home goin nice and everybody gettin along. So many time during the time, I asked myself and I asked the Lord, "Lord, why you give me these two kids if this gonna happen?" I wasn't sorry for her no more, 'cause she was gone. I look at my two kids and that's when my heart got fuller. I look at my two kids. This is what I got to do. They don't know anything.

But at the time, it was a hard pill for me to swallow. Like I said, I know it's nothing I could do for her. I did all I could and she was gone, but the two small kids, I had

to try to struggle to raise 'em. And as a young man, too. But I tried to keep my head on and do what I had to do. I mean they love their dad. They're crazy about me, 'specially my son. My son came down, my daughter too. My son came down summer before last and he spent a month with me, and every two weeks he give me a call, want to find out if I'm alright or whatever. My daughter, she call me often to let me know she doin alright and anything she could help me.

I stayed in Tampa. They moved. With they aunt and they grandmother and they great-grandmother. I was sending money to them. Like sometime I works two jobs, 'cause I had nothin to hold me back. I was free. I could work two jobs, come home and sleep, get something to eat and nothing to hold me back. I didn't even pick up a girlfriend or anything 'cause I didn't want nothin in the way. I just spent all my time workin and when I'm off from work I rest or eat or walk or do something.

And my oldest brother, he was a shrimper. He's the one learned me how to shrimp. He was in British Guyana, South America during the time. So he called me and asked me if I had wanted to come over there. He figured I was lonesome. "Let me think about it" I said. I didn't mind goin but I want to call my kids and explain to them. They asked me how long you going to stay there? I said "Well, I wants to stay a year over there then come back and that would be it." And then they tell me that that was too long. I said "What about 6 months and then I'll come back and if I like it I'll go back for another 6 months." So they agreed to that.

So I packed my clothes and I went up to Philly and I spent almost two weeks with them and I leave and I went over there to South America. I went on the boat. My brother and I worked, I think it was 7 or 8 months, but all the time I could call my kids and talk with them. And before I comes in the money be gone, 'cause the man who I was workin for, the company was out of town and they had the address and everything where to send that money to. And I wouldn't even draw nothin. We used to stay out sometime 14, 15 days and back in to the dock. One time my, I'll never forget my first trip I made. I came back, I think my paycheck was \$1700.

You get paid by the pound. That was my share, and it was me and my oldest brother. And I had a certain amount of money to go to [the kids] every month. So when I comes in I

don't have to do nothin. My money stays in the office and he would send what they have to send off. If I wants to buy something like some clothes or something, I would get some money and then go and buy.

So when I stayed for 7 months and I drewed out all my money, and when I came to leave from there and came back over here, Key West was the first place I came back to. It was the first time in Key West. I heard so much about Key West from some of the guys. It was in 1970. It was very different. If I knowed things would have been like how they was now I'd have bought me two or three homes. But anyway, I leave Guyana. When I came to Key West I had about \$26 or \$27,000. In that 7 months, plus the money I was sendin to my kids.

I went to Tampa 'cause my brother had send some things over for his wife, so I went to take it to her and spend a day with her. And I leave her and I shot on up to Philadelphia to see my two. And we talk and I spend one month in Philly and I told 'em I was goin back. I got my mother-in-law and I give my mother-in-law so much money for each one.

Then I went on back to South America. I stayed over there I think about 8 month that time. I had met a girl over there. We got engaged and I came back and I went on up to Philly and I explained to them, talked to them. They was big. They could understand everything then. Said "I done give you all my life now, it's time" They was happy for me and I glad they was happy for me. I didn't get married without lettin them know what to expect.

If they acted badly it would have made me feel a little bad but still I wasn't gonna get angry or anything with them. I was gonna sit them down and try to talk with them, and say "Now you know you haven't had a bad dad. You dad has been good to you." I coulda run off somewhere. Now it's time for y'all to stick with me. And they was happy for me. They just love me. They bring joy to my soul. I believe if my wife had died and we didn't have no kids, it would have been a loss to me and I didn't have nothing to look at. But these kids have bring joy to me even though I lose her. I had the kids to keep me in line too, to hold me in line. But I don't think no man could a been in my condition could a did any better for they kids.

They was happy I was gettin married and the one thing they wasn't too happy 'cause we was gonna get married over

there, and they had wanted to be over to the wedding. I went on back over there; me and my wife been engaged for almost a year, and the wedding date and everything has been set.

It's the strangest thing. I met my wife...we was leavin the dock goin fishin. We'd been about 2 hours away from the dock and we was gettin your nets and everything ready and I got hit on the shoulder by the winch. It hurt me so bad till it chip a bone in my shoulder. They had my brother call to the doctor to have someone take me to the hospital. My arm was all swollen. I had a ring on my finger. I couldn't even get the ring off. So they took me straight to the hospital and I wasn't thinkin about nothin. All I was thinkin about was tryin to get well and get out of there. And so one nurse was in there. And she comes in and just give me the injection and turn around and go. I looked at her one day and just looked out of curiosity I looked on her finger. She didn't have any rings on her finger. This, is the God's truth. I say she goin be my wife. I just said that to myself. Out of a clear blue sky.

I just saw her and I looked on her fingers and she didn't have any rings on, and she was a little younger than I were. I says she gonna be my wife. As I was feelin a little better, progressin I asked her "You married?" She said "No." I say "You haves a boyfriend?" She said "I had a boyfriend but we recently break up." I said to myself I said he must have seen me comin. And we start talkin. She went downstairs and she was checkin my chart. See if I was married. But everything I asked her she'd say "I'll think about it."

So after I got out of the hospital she told me where she lived. Her father died, got killed when she was young. Her mother and her grandmother and her uncle [lived there.] Me and my brother we had a nice place over there. I went home and changed clothes. I couldn't wait. She used to get out at 4:00. So I went by 'cause she told me she would want me to meet her mother and her grandmother. Her grandmother is very religious. I met her mother and her grandmother. And after all that I asked if I could take her out right away and she said "Yes." So I took her out and we talked. That's when we got engaged. And we got married '70.

We had a house and I had paid off the furniture. And everything was in the house when we got married. All we had to do was just take clothing. Everything was in there, even groceries, everything. I stayed there about three months

after we got married. I couldn't bring her with me 'cause I had to come over here and get her papers straightened out. I stayed here about 5 days and got her papers straightened out and I called her and told her. She wait till I got there and we went on to the American Embassy the next morning and pick up her visa and things like that. Then she have to go and see all her friends and let everybody know she leavin. I had wanted to come back home 'cause I wanted to be able to see my kids. She had didn't want to leave and after she came she liked it.

I moved back to Tampa and I was thinking I didn't like Tampa no more. There wasn't nothin in Tampa for me, too much memories. My kids, I think about them. I think about my first wife in Tampa. I said nah, we're goin back to Key West. And I came back here, me and my wife. And she's a nurse, but she works in the pharmacy now as a technician, 'cause she knows medicine and that's all she used to do over there. And we been together 20 years.

I didn't make up my mind to live in Key West until after I came back with her. The thing hurt me the most after I brought her over here and I was workin in Key West, I had to leave her in Tampa, and come to Key West. So that run on for about a couple of months and when I comes in I would go to Tampa. I said now this don't make no sense 'cause we have hospitals here, and if I'm goin work here... So after I got in Tampa she brought the subject up before I brought it up. She asked me, "Do they have any hospitals in Key West?" I said "Sure they have hospitals in Key West." She said "Well, if they have hospitals in Key West, why don't I move to Key West?" I was thinkin the same thing and I said "Sure, that would be a good idea." I didn't have a car at the time, and we didn't have no furniture to bring over or anything 'cause we were living in a furnished apartment.

I bought me a car and we had our clothes and she had brought some dishes and different things. So we had a car load down and I got one of these U Hauls trailer hitch behind the car and put the rest of the stuff in there. And [we] been here ever since. So that saved me a lot, seven, eight days on the water when I comes by here I just come home. I comes in I used to take her to the highway patrol place and learn her how to drive. Next thing I know she studying up in the book. So she got all the question and everything right so she got her license. First try.

[We lived in] a nice big house and there was no problem 'cause we had the money, the down payment and everything. But we didn't bought it 'cause we figured we wasn't gonna stay to Key West. So I worked, she worked and [if] the kids wanted something she would send it to them; she treated them just like a mother. They came down and visit us for a while. And they already had mostly finished school. The boy, he didn't want to go so bad but the girl, she wants to go back to the big city. So I tried to talk her out of it. She would go along with me but I saw she wasn't too happy, and I could understand that so I just let her go. I told her "You can go to nursing school."

I know [my wife] had wanted some kids. I didn't want to try to stop her 'cause I had some kids. If she wanted a kid I didn't want to try to block it. So she just keep hangin in, hangin in. She finally got pregnant but I wasn't too pleased about it after eight years. But I shouldn't try to block her and make her feel bad, make her feel guilty about it, 'cause she done all she could. Then after she had the girl she wanted a boy. She just was pushin it. She wanted a boy. She got pregnant again and sure enough it was a boy. And I told her, "Uh, this is the limit. This is the limit." A boy and a girl, and that's what she got. Take her a long time but she finally made it.

The girl, she's ten, the boy is eight. Both of my boys is September. The oldest boy is September the 21st and the this one is September the 22nd. [With my older children] the boy was happy, but my daughter, after [my wife] had this little girl she figured she wasn't the baby no more. She didn't want to show it but I could see it. She got a little jealous, 'cause she knows she was the baby. But she got used to it. She came around. Then my little boy was born. My little daughter, now she's the one that was hurt. She was jealous, real jealous, 'cause she was the first child with my second wife and she tried so hard to have 'em I guess she spoiled her rotten. She was a brat. And every time she comes by the crib she just grab him and pinch him. You had to keep your eye on her. She didn't like him at all. But after she seen the love startin to share she couldn't stand to take it.

I growed up in Charleston, SC. That's my home and that's where I growed up most of my young life. When my mother died there was a lot of us. My mother had eleven kids, five girls and six boys. I'm the eighth one. And the

old man, well you know he didn't say ditch us. But he was a young man and he had to go out too. He was there, but my older sister stepped in and act like a mother although she was married.

When my mother passed away I wasn't quite 7. I was born in 1936. And after I turned 9 years old, I looked older, by my size and I worked. I always been heavy. I always been big and broad, 'cause my daddy was like that. I didn't want to go to school. I wanted to go to work. So I went and I got a job. Took water for the bricklayers and carpenters. The bricklayers they had their mud. You had to go and tap the mud sometimes and put water on them and stuff like that. And I used to make a dollar a day. Five days, five dollars I used to make, but back then five dollars goes a long ways. I didn't take nothing out of that money. Take it straight to my sister. She takes what she want 'cause she used to take care of the house, wash my clothes, clean and stuff.

We used to live in the country part. I used to work in the city. I had to go to the city every morning. It was a crowd of us, grown men and I was the youngest one in the crowd. I was a youngster. Grown men, truck drivers and all that kind of stuff. And out of that five dollars I had to pay a dollar a week for the fare. But I didn't care. And I just worked and worked.

I had never stepped into a classroom. All my brothers and sisters they went to school, but I have never stepped in a classroom. The only time I had started to think about learnin and reading and do writin was when I start with this, fact about it I probably wouldn't a even tried it now if my back wasn't bad, if I would a been up there doin something. But I always been fortunate enough to learn from other people, and the type of job I used to learn from other people paid good.

I was a painter. I used to work to the shipyards sandblastin and plasterin. I used to make good money doin that, and carpenter helper. But if I seen somethin better I leave. I go for the most money. I never had taken the time [to learn to read.] But I could count. I could count but you could get me on this table with a pencil and I wouldn't know what I'm doin. But I could count in my head. No problem. I think it got in my way 'cause with my little knowledge and common sense I probably been a lot further than I am now.

[But] I was up front. You take most people. If they can't read, especially my age they bashful, ashamed, and I was never bashful to do anything I think was right. And I always been a workin man and try to keep my end of the bargain up, and that was it. And I always have a job. It might not be the kind I'm lookin for but I have it. It's something, 'cause when I approach a person, I let a person know right then and there.

Fact about it, most jobs I apply for, they give you an application and some time they be ready for you to go to work. They aint thinkin about the application. Set you right on to work. And as long as you got your social security they get the number and a lot of time later on they say "You can fill out your application." Well, I take it and gotta let somebody else fill it out because I can't read and write. I let them know up front. And when you tells people that and they look at you, they don't let you know that they watchin you but they watchin you.

Like if you workin with a carpenter you have to know to read your ruler and cut and things like that. You just use a little bit of common sense. A lot of times I learn from a lot of people. I learn from anybody I work with, and if I don't know how to do something I don't act like I know how to do it. I watch him, 'cause you work with some people they wouldn't try to learn you nothin or show you nothin. But I watch. Sometime I look like I'm not watchin but I'm payin attention. And then they send me to do so and so and I know what to get. And a lot of people I think in my lifetime if you be up front with people people know what to expect, 'cause if you try to pull any kind of thing they'll find out, and then they wouldn't trust you. But if you be up front they will trust you and a lot of 'em will help you.

But at that time, [when I was little] I didn't thinkin about my life ahead of me or the future. All I was thinking about right then was to work and try to help yourself, and that been my whole philosophy all my life, 'cause if you don't work it's nothing. You don't look for nothing.

I knew my dad was doin the best he could and it was hard on him too. My dad didn't have any education and it was more harder for him than it was even for me, because I think by me travel around and work different places and watch different people and talk with different people, I learned a lot just by listening to people and talkin to people.

I leave Charleston, fact about it I had a friend, he's in New York now. He's a minister. Was in 1954, we leave, me and him used to travel around up north together. Me and him used to travel together just like brothers. The first job after I leave home we went up to Maryland. We got a job in Maryland workin in a cannin factory. Canned tomatoes, okras and corn and stuff like that. And we worked there for three, four month and we saved up money and move on to another place. It wasn't that we was tryin to look for no pot of gold or nothin like that. We just travelin around and while we was travelin we was workin.

I will never forget this. We was in Allentown. We was workin with a man, and I mean he treat us good. So we went there and start workin for a man and his wife there. He just fell in love with us. He pay us good. Well he had a big farm, warehouse and stuff like that, with potatoes, different things. But during season different people comes in and does the work, harvest. But we would do the little odds and ends things round his house. He had a big place. It had tractors and stuff like that. We did the mowin the grass, 'cause you couldn't take no push mower there. They had tractors with mowers.

Then he had another place next to his own. We used to stay in. Didn't cost us no rent and he buy our food and clothes and stuff like that. He used to pay us good and we stayed with them a good while. So just like a drifter, we had to move on. We had wanted to move a long time but we just didn't know how to tell the man 'cause the man was so nice, and we know when we tell him he was gonna be hurt. But it came the time and we told him and he said "I sure don't want y'all's to leave. You good workers and you can be trusted." And he had done develop all that in us. He said "Well, I can't stop y'all boys from leavin. Any time you want a job remember you got a job." We tell him thank you and we leave there and we went to, I think it was West Virginia. And we just was goin different places.

We had never run into no trouble, never. And I know it was a lot of conflicts between the blacks and whites, but we had never run into no trouble. We did what we had to do to work and support ourself and never run into nothing. And I believe today through all this, you treat people the way you wish to be treated. If you wish to be treated nice, the right way you treat people that way and don't worry about it. Go on about your business. But when you mistreat people somebody will mistreat you. And that's my way I had all my

life comin up...to how a person think about you is how you think about yourself.

I leave Charleston in '58, and when I went back to Charleston it was in '72. Twenty years. It was in '72 and one of my brother died and I went home. And the old man couldn't believe it. I grabbed him, embraced him. I [had] been in touch with them but...after then every year I would go and spend two weeks with him, and we would sit down and talk, not like fathers and sons but like brothers. I got so many people up there but I try to spend the most of the time with him. So he passed on March of 1980, so when I goes home I have sisters and first and second cousin and all like that. It's not the same 'cause he's not there.

When I hurt my back, I was puttin up a big building. They rushin around. This was the foreman fault 'cause he was rushin the guys to put the scaffolds up. And them scaffolds, you got to put them things up right, especially if you're anywhere up high. And I was up there getting the mud and everything ready. It wasn't quite four stories. But I was, I still was lucky 'cause I could a break my neck or something like that. I mean this whole thing just tumbled. They didn't have it leveled like you should. I fell and fell, sittin like, I feel it right away, and I tried to get up and I couldn't get up. The ambulance came and took me to the hospital.

See it was a good thing there was nobody else up there. So they put me in traction. I been in traction for about 11 days. So he took the weights off my feet and let me walk around with a walker. He said that's the only way we gonna straighten you out. You have three disks messed up. He said it's gonna be a lot painful now but you can eliminate some of the pain if you go on and have surgery. Not that surgery gonna cure it.

So he said he known somewhere that make these steel braces, and he made me a set. Man came down while I was in the hospital and measured me up at the end of surgery and I was gettin ready to get discharged out of the hospital my brace was right there waitin on me. My wife used to comes early in the morning 'cause she used to work. She used to bathe me, and change my bed and stuff like that. Then they would give me a shot. I'll go to sleep and sleep for like two hours. That's how bad the pain was. I was on some strong medication. After the surgery I stayed in the

hospital maybe 17 days. I used to walk, 'cause you have to learn to walk all over again. You just can't move. You draggin your leg. You have a walker but somebody have to be right along side you.

About a year and seven months and I was back in the swing. I went back and start doing the same work. It was fine. When I comes home in the afternoon it's sore, a little painful. You know it's there 'cause you're doing physical work. But I would learn myself how to bend my knees and things like dealin with it. And I let that hot water runs on it and things like that. I was doin all right.

I worked, I can't remember how long, but it was a good while longer until the job complete. Then after that job complete I went back on the base 'causee you get paid more on the base anyway. I used to paint, but I don't want to get back into it because I don't need to be so hard on myself. Well, 'cause right now I'm not gettin any younger . Sometime when you is a little younger you think you can beat it. You against the odds but now the odds against me.

I'm fifty five. I wants to learn too. But my other problem, a house is not for me. I aint never liked stay home. I do what I can to help. I help my wife out in the house. I help a lot with the kids. I help a lot with the washing and keep the house clean, keep the kids... my boy, she don't have to touch him. And the girl, she dress herself. She works full-time. And well, my wife used to take care of a lady. And she died when my wife was takin care of her. She was 92 years old. Her daughter-in-law aint never gotten married, now she's 86, or 87. She's in the house by herself. And she paid [my wife] \$9.00 a night just to sleep there. To watch over her. If anything happens she knows all the doctor phone number. Plus she knows about medicine and if she wants something special to eat or something like that. She goes four night a week.

I asked her if that what she want to do. She said sure. She said it's not hard on her. It's no physical job. So when she comes in the morning she don't have a good night rest so the kids, everything is fine. I done got up at 6:30. Breakfast is for her if she want something to eat. So she just comes in and have a shower and talk with the kids, find out about they homework and what not. She likes to work. I ask her if this is like what she want to do, 'cause I don't want to take advantage of her. I know I been a hard working person all my life. When I met her, and up

hospital maybe 17 days. I used to walk, 'cause you have to learn to walk all over again. You just can't move. You draggin your leg. You have a walker but somebody have to be right along side you.

About a year and seven months and I was back in the swing. I went back and start doing the same work. It was fine. When I comes home in the afternoon it's sore, a little painful. You know it's there 'cause you're doing physical work. But I would learn myself how to bend my knees and things like dealin with it. And I let that hot water runs on it and things like that. I was doin all right.

I worked, I can't remember how long, but it was a good while longer until the job complete. Then after that job complete I went back on the base 'causee you get paid more on the base anyway. I used to paint, but I don't want to get back into it because I don't need to be so hard on myself. Well, 'cause right now I'm not gettin any younger . Sometime when you is a little younger you think you can beat it. You against the odds but now the odds against me.

I'm fifty five. I wants to learn too. But my other problem, a house is not for me. I aint never liked stay home. I do what I can to help. I help my wife out in the house. I help a lot with the kids. I help a lot with the washing and keep the house clean, keep the kids... my boy, she don't have to touch him. And the girl, she dress herself. She works full-time. And well, my wife used to take care of a lady. And she died when my wife was takin care of her. She was 92 years old. Her daughter-in-law aint never gotten married, now she's 86, or 87. She's in the house by herself. And she paid [my wife] \$9.00 a night just to sleep there. To watch over her. If anything happens she knows all the doctor phone number. Plus she knows about medicine and if she wants something special to eat or something like that. She goes four night a week.

I asked her if that what she want to do. She said sure. She said it's not hard on her. It's no physical job. So when she comes in the morning she don't have a good night rest so the kids, everything is fine. I done got up at 6:30. Breakfast is for her if she want something to eat. So she just comes in and have a shower and talk with the kids, find out about they homework and what not. She likes to work. I ask her if this is like what she want to do, 'cause I don't want to take advantage of her. I know I been a hard working person all my life. When I met her, and up

to the time that I got hurt, I never was a person to work and throwed my money away. I put my kids through school, but I always saved me some money.

Sometime things get into your mind. I think a few times there I tried to read a newspaper and sometimes it seemed I'm making sense with the thing and sometimes I wasn't making no sense. And I said this frustrating. I just can't understand what's goin on. I'm gonna go back to school and see if I can learn how. I know it's gonna be hard but I'm just gonna see if I can do it. But if I didn't hurt myself I would have never think about that. I could be makin me good money. I wouldn't be out there workin for no minimum wage.

[Lack of education] never got in my way. Never, not that I can think of. I always was a person to go out, and I believe if you go and you seek you'll find. I could drive when I was I guess around 12, 13 years old. You grow up around a farm and you learn to drive a truck, anything. You get in it and go. So I went to the driver's license place and they give me a driver's license book. I took the book. I didn't let them know I couldn't read anything. I couldn't read the book so I asked somebody to go over the book with me two, three times. I went and I told the office, "A lot of things in this book I don't understand. Some of them doesn't make no sense to me." I said "I know how to drive." I know the signs and stuff on the road. He said "As long as you know how to drive and know the signs, that's what counts."

So what he had wanted to prove that I know my signs first. So he gave me something like flash cards. I namin every card that he's flashin. So he said okay. We went for a drive. But this officer tried to trick me. I knew that's his job. So he was goin down a one way street and he came up to the light, and he asked me to make a left turn after the light turn green. So I put my right blinker on. He said "No, I want you to turn left." I said "I can't make a left turn on a right." I know he was trickin me. I caught it right quick. He give me my license.

I think after [my wife] finished high school she went to the University in Guyana, and she got her three, close to four years of education in medicine. She know I couldn't read and write but I always had good common sense. I don't get upset about things. But we gets along. I think if I

wasn't the type of guy like I am and treat people like I wish to be treated, me and her probably would have been separated. Money, anything, I'm a person I don't like to waste. I get on my kids when I see them throwin food in the garbage. It's a shame to throw away food 'cause there's too many people starving.

I tell my wife and she loves to shop for the kids and herself. I tell her, "Look, don't buy me things I don't need. I appreciate what you's doing but you got two kids and you got to look at their future. We have to look at they future. You just can't bring them in the world and drop them and expect the world to bring them up. 'Cause right now my daughter, she's in 6th grade. She's very smart, too. She's bringing nothing but A's and B's home. And she is in music. In her room she has her own computer. She got TV time. After that she get back in her room to her computer, do her science, her math and what not. A lot of times she be so busy in her education that I don't bother her to help me. I don't wants to worry her.

Well, my daughter, she helps me once or twice. And she always asks me to, but when she gets to have a little time I don't want to burden her too much. I just feel she has her whole life ahead of her. I want her, if the Lord spared my life, to see her growed up and I want her to be a fine young lady, a educated young lady. 'Cause that's what it's gonna take. See, that's why so many of the blacks today, they drops out of school and once they drops out of school, they can't face problems. They can't face life, and they turns into different things, to make easy money. It's not gonna work.

I thank God that I got so far in life, and I knock on wood and thank God. I had never, never been in jail in my life, although I had two speeding tickets. I feel like I made a lot of progress. Sometime I get home and pick up the book. It takes me a while but once I understand it...This was a rut I was in. I would have to spell the word out in my mind, and then try to pronounce it. And this is what [the teacher is] working on with me now. Like some words, I can just recognize 'em, look at 'em and call it. Memorize it. Use your ears and your mind, think about it.

It's a big responsibility, and I think I'm helpin my wife a lot with [the children] 'cause some families when there's no one around kids have a tendency to do what they wants to do. I don't care how good they are. You have to watch your kids, pay good strict attention to them. You've

got to have discipline, 'cause if you don't have no discipline then at home, how can you have discipline in class?

My son, he's good but he's not quite as good as [my daughter] is. I watch her. She seem a little gifted to me. I don't say nothing about it, but she really does. She probably gets it from her mother. She's really smart woman and a hard working woman. And next birthday come she'll be 45. She has never had a drink in her life. She has never smoked a cigarette in her life. So she had never had nothing to numb her brain. She'll do anything for them kids. But when she tell [my daughter] about her homework and she don't do it she comes up and tells her "Without this you is nothing." 'Cause you will be right up there in the street with a lot of the rest of 'em, doing drugs and whatever.

And she's very religious. She goes to church on Saturday. She's a 7th day Adventist. Just like when I met her, she was workin in a 7th day Adventist hospital. So her mother was in the 7th day Adventist, but her grandmother brought them in the church. I goes to church. I goes and I try to go a little bit more. I know what the church is for. I married her and you have to have God in your life. You have to have a supreme being and I believe in it. That's why I believe in treatin anyone the way I wish to be treated. Whether we know it or not we are brothers and sisters in the sight of God. I was young when my mother died. But it was words that she used to teach; I always could remember. Sometimes I drivin around town, these words flash through my mind.

Postscript

James is still attending the Learning Center. His attendance is sporadic, due in large part to his chronic back pain, his responsibilities as the primary care giver to his children and a family crisis he is weathering. He has made great progress in his reading ability. He works with a new instructor in the Learning Center who is a reading specialist and twice a week his literacy tutor spends an additional hour with him.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Let me say at the outset that once I began interviewing the five participants in this study and throughout the process of working with the material, it has become clear to me that there are many, many complex social and personal issues enfolded within the life experience of these adult learners. The life history of each person should and does stand on its own merit, regardless of the original purpose of this study.

The life history narratives are a response to the question I began with: "Who are these five people coming to class everyday when most people aren't?" Their experience as recounted in the narratives is inextricably linked to the fundamental questions that led to this study. In discussing the insights and themes that have emerged from the interview material, it is essential to restate that this was not a survey study with a sample population. My intent was never to generalize across participants to make predictions regarding the larger population of adult learners.

I did not set about to uncover similarities across participants' experience; nor did I expressly look for differences. I wanted to examine the individual experience

of five adult learners, preserving each story as a whole. As I fumbled around for a way to discuss the material of the narratives that would do justice to the individual participants, I realized that there really is only one approach I could justify: to affirm what the stories say to me.

After completing the work, I am left wondering: What do these life histories have to do with the question of motivation and commitment among adult learners?" First, it is important to keep in mind that the reason for interviewing the six learners was that they were the few who consistently attended classes at the Learning Center. I knew nothing other than they came almost everyday, when most people did not. The terms "motivation" and "commitment" were simply the labels I found, the name for the phenomenon.

I interviewed the five learners because they were motivated to come to class every day and I wanted to understand why. There would not be much substance found in simple responses to the question: "What motivates you to come to the Learning Center?" Other than on a purely superficial level, I am not sure anyone would be able to respond to such a question in a sincere and reflective way.

What Do the Life Histories of the Five Learners Say About
the Issues of Motivation and Commitment?

To respond to this question it is necessary to acknowledge how participants happened to be in an adult basic education in the first place. All of the participants, with the exception of one who never attended formal schools at all, had obviously dropped out of school at some point in their lives or they would not have been in adult basic education classes. The circumstances varied slightly from person to person, but it is striking that the three women left school because they wanted to get married, because they were pregnant or both. There were, I believe, often other mitigating circumstances that led to the decision to leave school and possibly the decision to get married or become pregnant.

It is also important to note what brought participants to the Learning Center. In each case, on the surface, it seemed to be something different. Sally came because she had run out of things to do at home and realized she would not get a decent paying job without her GED. Michelle had a life altering illness and had asked her God to intervene. Gloria was mandated to come or lose her public assistance. Louis was referred by another agency in order to help him find a job. James was recovering from an injury, unemployed and probably bored with being at home.

All are legitimate motivations, but there are several unifying themes that emerged in the interviews. First, while the actual impetus to enroll in class may have come from different sources, the five participants stayed in the Learning Center, and came to classes every day because they wanted to. No matter what the motivation, if it is external, whether subtle or coercive, real or imagined, if these five people did not want to be in the Learning Center, I am convinced they would not have stayed.

According to Rubenson (1982) there is not one unifying theory explaining participation since a phenomenon as complex as participation "requires not a single theory but a conjunction of a variety of theories" (p. 62). However, one explanation that seems to hold potential for explaining participation is one advanced by Miller almost thirty years ago (1967). His assertions were based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Lewins force-field analysis (1947). Briefly summarized, what Miller proposed was a theory that examined the needs of the individual and the positive and negative forces that act upon the individual to influence the decision to participate or not participate.

This theory certainly has implications here. During the interviews, participants talked about being "ready" to be in class, or "knowing it was the right time" to come. It could be as simple and straightforward as James, who openly

states that had he not injured his back, he probably would never have thought to come to school. In a somewhat different light though, Sally, Michelle, and Gloria talk about their determination to succeed, to make it this time.

Sally: "[It] never entered my mind [before.] Because even when [my husband] brought it up to me, I wouldn't even hear it...I just didn't feel right with it. It could have been the determination. Maybe it was there in the closet, 'way back and then made up my mind this is what I wanted to do. It was easier because now maybe I waited long enough to where that's what I really wanted...So it had to be the right time and place for it."

Michelle: "It's just that I'm like excited right now...God must be answerin my prayers slowly but surely because I feel like I'm lookin on the bright side and I'm being positive about everything now, and everything that I do I'm serious at it...I feel school is where I want to be now."

Gloria: "And here I am, I'm free. Just comin to a classroom and pickin up your skills. I knew I had to do that one day. And I'm glad. I like it! I came and I sat down and I read. I was interested! I wanted to catch up on what happened all them eleven years that I just dropped out and didn't know nothin. I was ready!"

Louis expresses a similar sentiment:

"Wanting to improve myself, wanting to improve my condition is something that has been with me a long time, since I was a kid...For the first time in my life I'm gettin close and it feels scary...I resented other people trying to use my brightness for what they thought it should be used for. And for the first time I'm gettin in touch with that brightness or intelligentness and usin it in a way I feel comfortable with, in a way that I want, goin in a direction that I want to go in."

Whether boredom, an empty house or an ultimatum prompted participants to enroll in class, nothing would have kept them coming everyday if they had not felt some other, internal calling. "Readiness" emerged as a primary factor in the Darkenwald and Merriam (1985) study of participation in adult basic education, therefore it is obviously a phenomenon common to other adult education settings. Truthfully, I do not know where it comes from or when. But whether in words or in sentiment, the message is there in the experience of the five learners.

Seen in the light of force field theory, perhaps it was that the enabling forces in participants' lives were stronger than the inhibiting forces, resulting in participation. Or, in all cases, the basic life needs were being met of food, shelter, safety and so the learners were free to pursue education--a self-actualizing activity.

Second, I noticed as participants talked about their experience in the Learning Center that feelings of success began to breed other feelings of success. Over a long enough period of time, perhaps this could counterbalance the chronic low self-esteem of many of the learners. In Gloria's words are the sentiments most participants expressed in one way or another:

"I found the learning center, as part of my family. Part of somethin that belonged to me. I loved it. It gave me a chance. I started learnin how to use a

computer. A typewriter. 'Cause I had never in my life typed. I got into the big stuff, the computers. And I enjoyed 'em. I was willing to learn, and I was willing to listen. I wanted to block the past and show people that I was a good person. I showed respect for people and I wanted the same from everybody else."

These positive feelings may have been another reason learners came to the Learning Center. Some became confident enough in themselves and their abilities that they found themselves helping other learners on a daily basis.

As previously stated, all participants had dropped out of school for various reasons. But it is fair to say, based on participants' descriptions, that none of them had very successful school experiences. All of the participants were raised in dysfunctional families of one sort or another. From the retelling of their experiences, I got the distinct impression that they grew up with no sense that they were intelligent, worthwhile human beings deserving of love and respect. In short, there was not much of a basis for feeling good about oneself.

The successes, even the smallest and seemingly insignificant ones were, I think, addictive in the most positive way. Having tangible proof that they could actually learn to use a computer, "do fractions like boiling an egg," solve algebra problems, recognize three- and four-letter words without spelling them out letter by letter,

write an essay, and simply take the GED test, participants experienced a shift in self-image, for the better.

I think that the five participants experienced the Learning Center as a positive place to be. Amid the difficult childhoods, the failures and disappointments, the painful adulthoods, and uncertain futures, the Learning Center was one stable element and their participation, something over which they had control.

"There was times I just couldn't wait to get over there! I was always the first one on the porch! I would run over there. I was determined to learn somethin. I was meeting people. I was socializing" (Gloria).

"...my husband [said] 'Well, you more devoted to the school then to the house. What it gonna be, the house or the school?' I say 'Man, it's gonna be the school'" (Michelle).

For whatever reason, learning feels good, perhaps because it makes us feel better about ourselves. This applies not only to the participants here, but to many other people as well. I count myself among them.

I would be remiss if I did not say that I believe there is a side to this that may not be entirely positive, if that is indeed that correct word. For a few of the participants, I have wondered if the Learning Center was more of an escape from, rather than a transition to, the so-called "real world." Sally Wagner and Michelle Davis had definite goals in mind for themselves--passing the GED and

finding better jobs than they had previously held. Their participation in the Learning Center was a means to a desirable end.

On the other hand, I believe that Gloria and Louis would still be coming to the Learning Center if their on-the-job-training program had not ended and compelled them to begin working. It was a relatively unpressured environment, with few very stressful demands placed on people, social interaction was plentiful and the schedule and requirements were flexible, quite unlike the everyday world of work. Doctors' appointments could be easily kept, sick children tended to, assignments made up, and absences relatively consequence-free.

To be sure, many of us have experienced the same feelings perhaps while in college or graduate school. Soon, however, the real world intrudes and we are forced make the transition. The cocoon-like nature of a learning environment is ambivalent. No one may want to move on but it is natural to do so.

Emergent Themes in the Life Histories

Quite unexpectedly, during the interview process and while crafting the narratives, myriad other issues emerged. Although I have done this type of research in the past, I

was still unprepared for just how rich the material was. Many important, sociological, and personal themes are woven through interviews and narratives; some are common to all participants, others unique to an individual. It is not possible to discuss all of them here, however, I would like to address several of the more salient issues embodied in these narratives.

Class, Gender and Race

Whatever else may have emerged from this study, it is permeated by issues of class, gender and race. The decades may be different for some of the participants, but the issues are the same. The five learners in this study and the majority of the people who come to adult education are members of either the working class or more often, the underclasses; they are also most often women or minorities or both.

All of the participants grew up either continually or occasionally confronting poverty where, at times, the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing were not fully met. Sometimes the conditions of poverty were brought on by loss of employment due to substance abuse and dysfunctional behavior; sometimes they were brought on a father or mother abandoning the family. Whatever the cause, the result was the same.

Some of the participants have gotten out of the type of poverty they faced as children. Sally and Michelle are married and together with their husbands, they have luckily been able to provide fairly well for their families. James, until recently, worked hard and was able to send two children to college. His wife now helps him support the family since she works full-time in a semi-professional position. Louis has only recently begun to work, but his wife is in the military. They may not have had a lot to spare, but there was always a buffer between them and true poverty. Gloria has not been quite as lucky, although I believe she is in a much better position now than she has been in before in her life.

Whether or not they have more money and material comforts now, the legacy of life in the underclass is found in other aspects of participants' lives: poor education across many generations, dropping out of school, early pregnancy and marriage, emotional and physical abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, and low self-image and self-confidence. Certainly these problems are not only the domain of the poor. They exist in the affluent sectors of society as well. Just being poor, doesn't mean that one will necessarily be afflicted with these problems, but the likelihood that one will is far greater.

The true difference is found in what Belenky et al. (1986) describe as "the allocation of life chances" (p. 160). In their interviews with women, they describe instances of sexual abuse with two women that occurred in childhood. One woman was affluent, the other poor. Because of factors related to affluence, one woman was eventually able to come to terms with the legacy of abuse through years of therapy and family support and move forward in her life. This was not at all the case for the poor woman. Her father was arrested after she disclosed what was happening and her mother threw her out of the house. She is now on welfare and is the single mother of two small children. Life in the underclass goes on.

With the exception of James who did not attend formal school, all of the other participants were shuffled around in public school, mistreated, ignored, mislabeled, kicked out or pushed out. They had no one, no family member, no elder sibling to challenge the system and advocate on their behalf. None of their parents had finished school; none had the interest or ability to help them with school work.

All of these participants dropped out of school fairly early, with the exception of Louis who left in the eleventh grade. Immersed in difficult home lives, coping with substance abuse themselves or in family members, feeling "dumb" or incapable throughout years of schooling anyway,

quitting seemed like a natural decision. Few people, if anyone, either in school or at home ever tried to dissuade them.

None of the participants had examples in their families, in their neighborhoods or among their peers, of people who took advantage of education to change their lives. No one they knew went to college or sought careers. Most of their friends, siblings and parents quit school and "got by." For the women, many of their friends, sisters, and mothers were pregnant by the time they were sixteen or seventeen, if not earlier, whether they were married or not. They did not have role models of women who made decisions to take different paths other than wife and mother.

Dysfunctional Families, Violence and Substance Abuse

Without a doubt, the most salient issue for me in the life narratives of the five learners is the pervasiveness of violence and substance abuse in their lives. Each person, throughout their life had to confront violence of one form or another. For James, the violence was perhaps the least obtrusive, though not less painful. Losing his mother when only a small boy, and being abandoned by his father, he at least had the benefit of an extended family and eleven brothers and sisters to fill some of the void.

Violence of a very different nature was more the norm for the others.

For the rest of the participants, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of themselves and other family members was an all too common occurrence. They had fathers and mothers who hit them, their brothers and sisters and each other fairly regularly. Two of the women found themselves in abusive relationships with men later on their lives as well. One of the women was sexually assaulted by her father and one of the men, as a boy, was repeatedly victimized by men, women and family members throughout his childhood and adolescence.

I had not expected the stories of violence participants experienced in their childhoods. The low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence that environments like these breed led some of the participants to seek out adult relationships where these same problems were present. Some were abused by spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends or other adults; some found themselves struggling with alcohol and drug addiction as teenagers and adults; some simply believed that they were not worthy of anything "good" happening to them.

No one single experience could ever reverse a lifetime of pain and struggle. Negative experiences cannot be erased, nor forgotten. On the contrary, they, with all

experiences, are incorporated into the lives that participants live, the beliefs they have and the individuals they are. I believe that the five adults in this study experienced the Learning Center as a beneficial place to be; a place where they began to have feelings of success and growth. One experience can not elevate self-esteem or bestow a positive self-image. This was only a beginning and perhaps a step down a better path.

The Mystique of the GED

The participants clearly do not use the same labels as I do for the phenomena of motivation and commitment. In responding to the question of what motivates them to keep coming to the Learning Center, most answered without hesitation: "I want to get my GED!" Except for Louis who already had his GED, this was the holy grail for the remainder of the participants.

The GED has such enormous power for the learners in this study and for others who have attended the Learning Center. The GED is discussed with reverence and fear. The participants, and most people coming to the Learning Center, have imbued it with a certain mysticism, a power to change their lives forever. When asked, the learners in this study could not really articulate what the GED meant for them personally.

In most cases, it is a very practical goal. For most, it represents accomplishment in one sense, completing something left unfinished, succeeding where they have previously failed. Some, like Sally Wagner, put the GED in the position of getting them a higher paying or more prestigious job. Others, like Michelle Davis, use the GED as a symbol of achievement, to be a source of pride for their parents and families.

What is most surprising to me is that attaining the GED has come to mean such success when finishing high school and getting a "true" diploma meant nothing. For all of the participants except James Freeman, the decision to drop out of school was made fairly easily, with little or no resistance from family or teachers. The notion that graduating from high school was an achievement meant very little at the time. Now, however, at these various stages in their lives, getting the GED has come to mean everything.

Almost all of the participants at one point or another express feelings of well-being and satisfaction upon mastering some academic skill, such as solving an algebraic equation, working fractions or writing an essay. They have experienced true joy and validation in these moments. However, no one can convey what these feelings really represent. Only Louis talks of the value of learning for

its own sake; the exhilaration of reading Shakespeare even though, and maybe because, he did not understand one word. Although I have felt the same excitement in studying Russian or ancient French, I do not know its source or understand its effect.

Perhaps participants do not express their sense of motivation in a concise manner. But there are elements of motivation in their words. For Gloria, motivation resulted from a sense of social connection to others in the Learning Center, laughing, joking and interacting with peers for the first time in many years and from finally learning to "do fractions like boilin an egg!" For Sally, motivation was found in seeing that there were other people her age attending the Learning Center and in realizing that no one was going to make her stand up and give an oral report. For Michelle, motivation came from seeing that she could actually learn to do algebra despite being labelled "remedial" her whole life.

The quest for the GED and the fact that it holds so much power for the participants in this study and many, many other students in adult basic education, in part, can be attributed to a feeling of "outer-directedness." Many of the disempowered or disenfranchised believe that what they feel inside is not valid enough, that they are unable to learn for and by themselves and that they must directed in

their learning by someone else. The fact that they buy into the dominant "wisdom" that the GED is necessary for a viable life (which it may or may not be depending on the circumstances) is itself accommodation to external authority.

For the most of the learners in this study, attaining the GED IS education. There is little appreciation of learning for its own sake. There are glimmers of possibility, but still they are fixated on the "thing," with little regard for the process.

Although some of the participants are in the workforce, their ability to perform their jobs well is unrelated to whether or not they have a high school diploma or a GED. One is a data entry clerk, one a school bus aide, one a laundry worker, and one a library assistant. The GED was nothing more than a formality. It saddens me to say that I believe these men and women will always have jobs in this stratum of the economy. I believe this not because of something lacking in the learners, but because of inequities imbedded in the system. The GED is not the ticket to the top it is often portrayed to be. Whatever the power it may have to the learners, this reality will not easily be changed.

What do the Life Histories say to Adult
Basic Education Practitioners?

Along the way, I asked participants to discuss the Learning Center, their own learning processes and goals. For most, this seemed difficult to do. Perhaps this was because they were not able to express their thoughts and feelings in words. It may also have been because they had never thought about such things as their own learning processes and education; they had probably never been asked before in their lives. With the exception of Louis, who was able to put words to these experiences, the rest of the participants could not articulate their feelings and thoughts about learning, motivation, success and achievement.

However, most participants did express their feelings about the organization and atmosphere in the Learning Center. What clearly emerged was that the adult learners in this study needed and appreciated "space" and flexibility in the learning process. They wanted guidance and advice, but they did not want to be constantly told what to do. They liked working on their own, with occasional group activities.

A formal classroom environment would not have been conducive to the type of atmosphere we were trying to

create; students were not at the same level and did not work at the same pace or in the same way.

Sally: "The environment was really good. Relaxed. The teachers worked on us...you all had so many different levels in one room...so you had to let the students do some of it on their own. When they're comin to a problem, then you'd work individually with 'em."

Louis: "I like workin by myself. I have some personal, specific goals that I wanted to meet and that worked out pretty good. Settin the time I could come and havin someone check with me occasionally and not on a real consistent basis. I could just report my progress to them...I didn't feel that there was real time pressure or anything like that."

This is not to say that there were not expectations or certain basic guidelines that everyone in the Learning Center was asked to respect. But in working with adults, it was important to recognize that each person may have come to the Learning Center for a different purpose, with different needs, strengths and weaknesses. It would not have been in anyone's best interest to distill everyone down to a common denominator.

In the end, I am reluctant to offer any advice about "retention" of adult basic education students. The clearest message from the five learners in this study was that they were ready to be in the Learning Center and pursue their own education. Certain conditions may have kept them coming, the flexibility, individual guidance, lack of pressure, socializing with peers, and feelings of success.

We tried to operate on the assumption that the adult learners were not seeking to return to "school." They were trying to complete an unfinished education. Ultimately, their personal determination is the deciding factor.

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

Methodological Considerations

What Kind of Truth Do You Get?

As with any research study, there are certain limitations to be considered. In qualitative research in general, and interviewing research in particular, the researcher plays a prominent and very visible role in the entire process. Qualitative researchers, therefore, do not as a rule attempt to account for researcher "interaction" or "contamination." Rather, we acknowledge that the type of research we are interested in conducting is based on human interaction and builds upon relationships among people. I acknowledge my fundamental influence on the process and content of the interviews. This, however, does not preclude focusing on the words of the participant in the final analysis.

Van Maanen (1988) has suggested that we replace the concepts borrowed from positivistic research, such as reliability and validity, and generalizability with "apparency" and "verisimilitude," and "transferability." Certainly, in the case of phenomenological research, particularly interview research, a more appropriate set of criteria must reflect the underlying philosophy.

Mishler (1990) adds the criteria of trustworthiness to evaluating qualitative data. He states, "...focusing on trustworthiness rather than truth displaces validation from its traditional location in a presumably objective...and neutral reality, and moves it to the social world--a world constructed in and through our discourse and actions..." (p.420).

I was not looking for the "truth" in conducting this research. I wanted to document that which was real to the participants. I had no way to prove that what participants were saying was in fact what exactly happened in any given situation. But that issue is irrelevant. No such "record" exists of any individual's life experiences; all any of us ever have are "memories of memories" (Gray 1986). What is important is how participants remember and recount their experiences. That is what is real.

The Relationship Between Researcher and Participant

The researcher/participant relationship is always a fragile one. Even after it is initially negotiated, the relationship is tenuous, capable of being altered at any moment. An additional complicating factor in this research was that there was a pre-existing and on-going learner/teacher relationship between myself and the

participants. The learners were students in the Learning Center prior to beginning the interviews and they continued on throughout the entire process.

I was obviously aware of this relationship before embarking on this project. I was not certain how it would affect the interviews or the research project. I had no way of judging how it would impact participants, myself or our relationship. First, I believe from comments some of the participants made, that they probably agreed to the interviews because of who I was. Had a stranger approached them off the street, I am not sure they would have agreed to participate. Some of the learners felt that they "were helping me out" or "doing me a favor."

A salient example of this is found in an unfortunate turn of events that has taken place since completing the interviews. For reasons that have nothing to do with this research project, my relationship with two of the participants has become strained and distant. Both of these participants made comments concerning their involvement in this research, something to the effect of "I told you my life story and what did it get me?" I was both hurt and surprised but we were able to resolve the problem after a brief discussion. Nevertheless, I have since become more acutely aware of the implications of "telling someone your life story."

The pre-existing relationship was beneficial in some ways since the familiarity I felt with the learners allowed me to ask questions that I might not have felt comfortable to ask otherwise. On the other hand, there are issues I may not have brought up because I was already somewhat familiar with participants' lives. I tried consciously not to let this happen too often since I was aware of this possibility from the start. The best approach I found to this dilemma was to discuss the nature of both relationships with participants and to try to move beyond it.

Because of the learner/teacher relationship, I felt that the participants and I were in a situation of unequal power during the interviews. This was apparent with some participants more than others. I do not feel that it compromised the material in any substantial way, but I was aware of instances where the participants were editing or modifying the way they were describing an experience in their lives, perhaps not to offend me or embarrass themselves. In any event, telling someone what you think they want to hear may be an issue in any researcher/participant relationship.

Conclusion

When I originally conceived this research project, it was to be an investigation into the motivation and

commitment of six adult learners who were regularly attending classes at the Community Learning Center. I had read so many studies of nonparticipation among adult learners, surveys of reasons why adults do not persist, and explanations of the barriers to participation. Certainly, our program was plagued by the same problems; we had and continue to have a very high attrition rate among the adults who enroll in our classes. However, I saw six exceptions to this rule and an opportunity to study the phenomenon of participation instead.

I wanted to know who the six people were who were coming to the Learning Center every day and what motivated them to come. This could not be accomplished simply by asking the question "What motivates you to come to the Learning Center?" It is possible, of course, to answer this question if one has a concrete goal to achieve such as passing the GED or learning to read. A deeper understanding can only come through the examination of the complex factors of life experience.

As to who they were, they were women and men, though mostly the former, they were younger and older, Black, White and Hispanic. All were of poor or working class families. They all had extremely difficult issues to confront in childhood and adolescence--absent or dysfunctional parents, violence and abuse, alcoholism, drug

addiction or all of these. Some were children when they had children. Some have changed their lives for better, others still struggle.

At the start, the six learners appeared to be exceptional only because they were attending every day and most people were not. Now that the process is complete, I understand that they are extraordinary for many other reasons and in many different ways. I was not at all prepared for the pain and struggle in the life experiences of the five learners I interviewed. By most people's standards, perhaps only for those of us lucky enough not to have been born in the underclass, or to dysfunctional families, these five individuals have had very difficult lives.

Being orphaned to a babysitter in the neighborhood, having a mother who is a crack addict, being put in charge of your five brothers and sisters at the age of nine because your mother abandoned the family and your father is absent and an alcoholic, these are not the components of a "normal" and happy childhood. But the lives of these learners are testaments to triumph (of one sort) and survival. Yes, they have many, many obstacles to face, many issues to resolve, but that these learners are living, functioning human beings is to be commended. That Michelle

has come to a place and time where she feels confident enough to say "It's my time to win," is extraordinary.

There is an amazing and sincere spirituality present in the experience of the participants. It is there in words and in sentiment. All of the participants talk about "God" specifically in their lives and about praying and asking for help. But "God" is not necessarily the only evidence of the kind of spirituality I mean. I see the spirituality of the participants in how they understand their own experiences. They have a way of looking at the detrimental experiences in their lives that does not assign blame or inspire anger or bitterness. They accepted what they were given in life, they still loved their families no matter what, they held on and kept on moving.

I learned many lessons from the experience of the five learners in this study and from the interaction I had both before and during the process of interviewing them. As the learners' stories unfolded, I saw many parallels between my experience and that of the participants. The context may have been different, but some of the challenges and obstacles were the same.

In terms of the original purpose of this project, the most important insight for me has been that adults come to learning and stick with it when it means something to them and when they have an inner motivation to accomplish some

goal. They can not be given the motivation and commitment from the outside; they can not be made to participate. They must be "ready" to do it.

The most salient insight I gained personally has to do with the astonishing resiliency of the human soul. In the face of what seemed like insurmountable obstacles and debilitating life circumstances, the response of the five learners interviewed here was to survive. In the end, maybe this is not extraordinary, maybe this is human nature. As Louis said, "Survival ain't nothin but a thing."

APPENDIX: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

1. You are being asked to participate in a research project based on in-depth interviewing. This research project will be the basis of my doctoral dissertation which I am completing through the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. Interview material and other data from the research process will be used in my dissertation and in the oral defense that will take place at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst.
2. All interviews will be audiotaped. This is done for two reasons: 1) so that nothing will be missed during the interviews; and 2) so that a permanent record of the interviews can be maintained. Throughout the project, particularly in the final presentation of material in my dissertation, every effort will be made to protect your anonymity.
3. The complete interview process will take 12 hours. During the first stage of the process (2 hours) you will be asked to create a written chronology of your background and experience in as much detail as possible. This will be the basis of some of the later interviews.
4. The next stage (8 hours) will consist of eight 1 hour one-to-one interviews. The purpose of these interviews is to more deeply explore your background, previous educational experiences, your present experiences in this class and how you have come to be here in this class.
5. At the completion of the first two stages, all interviews will be transcribed either by myself or an independent transcriber. The transcriber will not be familiar with you or any of the participants in the research. In the transcribing process, initials will be substituted for all names.
6. After reading all typed interview transcripts, I will craft a life history, similar to an autobiography. Crafting the life history will involve removing all interviewer questions, and editing the interview material both to protect anonymity and ensure readability.
7. Prior to the final stage of the interviewing project, I will provide you with a copy of your life history. During the last 2 interview sessions you will have the opportunity to respond, comment and make suggestions for changes.

8. You may withdraw at any stage from this research project.

9. All interviews will be conducted in an agreed upon location.

I have read and consent to the above conditions and I agree to participate in this research project.

Date

Participant Signature

Researcher Signature

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, W. (1990). Read with me. Boston, Ma: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bateson, M. C. (1989). Composing a life. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Beder, H.W., & Valentine, T. (1990). Motivational profiles of adult basic education students. Adult Education Quarterly, 40(2), 78-94.
- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R., Tarule, J.M. (1986). Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice and mind. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Berger, P.L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.
- Bogdan, R. (1977). Being different: The autobiography of Jane Fry. New York: Wiley.
- Borg, W.R., & Gall, M.D. (1983). Educational research: An introduction. New York: Longman.
- Boshier, R.W. (1971). Motivational orientations of adult education participants: A factor analytic exploration of Houle's typology. Adult Education, 21, 3-26.
- Boshier, R.W. (1976). Factor analysts at large: A critical review of the motivational orientation literature. Adult Education, 27, 24-47.
- Brookfield, S.D. (1986). Understanding and facilitating adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bross, T.M. (1985). Social network, social support and persistence in GED programs. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, New Jersey.
- Cevero, R.M., & Kirkpatrick, R.E. (1990). The enduring effects of family role and schooling on participation in adult education. American Journal of Education, 99(1), 77-94.

- Clark, L.K. (1986). Dropout and persistence in adult basic education. Unpublished masters thesis, North Carolina State University.
- Clayton, D.E., & Smith, M.M. (1987). Motivational typology of reentry women. Adult Education Quarterly, 37, 90-104.
- Connelly, F.M., & Clandinin, D.J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. Educational Researcher, 19(5), 2-14.
- Cross, K.P. (1979). Adult learners: Characteristics, needs, and interests. In R. Peterson (Ed.), Lifelong learning in America. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cross, K.P. (1981). Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Courtney, S. (1991). Why adults learn: Toward a theory of participation in adult education. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall.
- Darkenwald, G.G., & Merriam, S. (1979). Participation and persistence in American adult education. NY: College Examination Board.
- Darkenwald, G.G., & Merriam, S. (1982). Adult education: Foundations of practice. New York: Harper & Row.
- Darkenwald, G.G., & Valentine, T. (1985). Outcomes of participation in adult basic skills education. Lifelong learning: An omnibus of practice and research, 8(5), 17-22.
- Gitlin, A.D. (1990). Educative research. Harvard Educational Review, 60(4), 443-466.
- Goetz, J.P., & LeCompte, M.D. (1984). Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Gray, S. (1986). Sex and death to the age 14. New York: Vintage.
- Heilbrun, C.G. (1988). Writing a woman's life. New York: Ballantine Books.

- Hoffee, J.O. (1985). Analysis of factors that influence participation of the disadvantaged in adult education. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
- Horton, M. (1990). The long haul. New York: Doubleday.
- Houle, C.O. (1961). The inquiring mind. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Husserl, E. (1981). Phenomenology. (Richard E. Palmer, Trans.). In McCormick and Ellison (Eds.), Husserl: Shorter works. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. (Original work published in 1927)
- Lather, P. (1986). Issues of validity in open ideological research: Between a rock and a soft place. Interchange, 17(4), 63-84.
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method, and reality in social science. Human Relations, 1, 5-41.
- Maslow, A.H. (1954). Motivation and personality. New York: Harper & Row.
- Miller, H.L. (1967). Participation of adults in education: A force-field analysis. Boston: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, Boston University.
- Mishler, E.G. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies. Harvard Educational Review, 60(4), 415-442.
- Morstain, B.R., & Smart, J.C. (1974). Reasons for participation in adult education courses: A multivariate analysis of group differences. Adult Education, 24, 83-98.
- Rockhill, K. (1982). Researching participation in adult education: The potential of the qualitative perspective. Adult Education, 33(1), 3-19.
- Rose, M. (1989). Lives on the boundary. New York: Penguin Books.

- Rubenson, K. (1982). Adult education research: In quest of a map of the territory, Adult Education, 32(2), 57-74.
- Schutz, A. (1967). The phenomenology of the social world. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- Seidman, E. (1986). In the words of the faculty. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shor, I. (1987). Freire for the classroom: A sourcebook for liberatory teaching. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Stanage, S.M. (1987). Adult education and phenomenological research: New directions for theory, practice, and research. Malabar, FL: Kreiger Publishing Co.
- Taylor, S.J., & Bogdan, R. (1984). Introduction to qualitative research methods: The search for meanings. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Turkel, S. (1972). Working. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). Tales of the field: On writing ethnography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

