The Power of Self-Esteem

Using It All To Get It All

Willie H. Houseal

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This book is dedicated to
my wife, Cleopatra (Pat), and to my children

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This book and the story behind it would not have been possible without the help of many people. Above all, I am grateful to Mamie Houseal, my sister and one of my best friends, who helped me through some difficult times during the loss of my mother. I can never repay her for the many sacrifices she made for me, even though times were not easy for her either.

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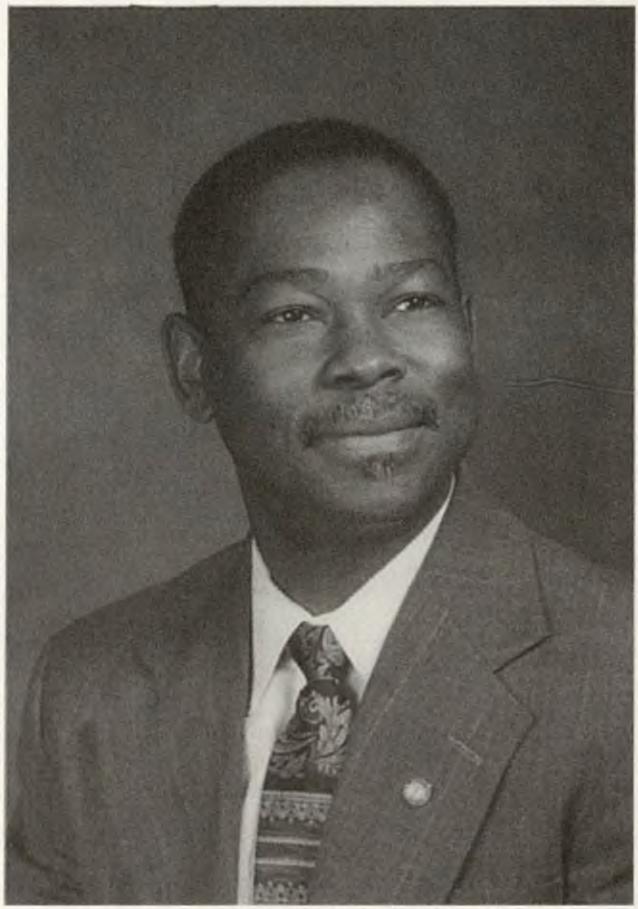

Willie H. Houseal

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Preface

This book is about developing self-esteem. The combination of the prefix **self** and the root word **esteem** exemplifies the means by which one feels about oneself. Whether one feels good about oneself or whether one feels bad about oneself, esteem can be measured by one's action as we function in our society. For me to give you a lot of statistics which proves that which you already know, would only verify the fact that the majority of all inmates, whether federal, state or local, experience low self-esteem. This feeling of differential approval (meaning it doesn't really matter how one feels about oneself), and the nonchalant attitude appears to be evident throughout this whole society.

In our society today, self-esteem is absent from our youth, especially among black youth. Statistics show a complete deterioration of self-worth and a lack of determination to be successful as viewed by society's standards. We also have to keep in mind that changes are rapidly taking place.

This book attempts to examine how self-esteem affects us as we deal with life's ups and downs along the way. When one completes the reading of this book, regardless of age, sex or ethnic background, two things will have emerged. First, actual accounts of how self-esteem affected my life, and second, the fact that anyone could have written this book.

This book chronologically lists the events in my life which presented adversities and how I ultimately overcame them. I used the "lemon in life" concept as an example to show how to turn adversity into opportunity. My son Terry would say, "Skip the lemonade, let's make a lemon meringue pie."As an end result of overcoming adversities, self-esteem

becomes a major component of good character. It worked for me. It is my desire to share with each reader the idea that adversities are not always a curse but may well be a blessing in disguise. I have never aspired to be a writer; however, this book will serve as a biography as well as a guide to pull oneself up by his or her own bootstraps, and perhaps make a contribution to society.

I was well aware that speaking and writing abilities were the alternative vehicles used to succeed in life rather than using the athletic route, for speaking and writing skills are ideal ways of getting one's point across. Someone once said,"If I lost all of my faculties including my arms and legs, give me speech and a means to communicate and I can regain all that I have lost and more." I never knew when the time would come for me to share these experiences. I only knew that one day I would. I didn't think that I would get the green light until something special in my life would take place. Little did I know that the time had come because something special happens every day. The Lord has blessed me to remain on time side of life with a story to tell to all who would have ears to hear and eyes to read these words. I am hoping to get a lot of mileage from this book because it just might be the beginning of something good, or it just might be my last effort.

Basically, I'm just a simple person who knows simple people, and who's trying to live a simple life. I would like to dedicate this book to the ones I truly love, as well as those who truly love me. Thanks, Pat, for believing in me. Thanks, Willie, Kat and Terry, for giving me a strong will to live, and thanks to all of my brothers and sisters who encouraged me along the way.

1

The Early Years

It was the year nineteen hundred and fifty-one, July 23rd, I was the last of eleven children born to Vera Houseal. I was the last child born in our home at 700 Lamar Street in Valdosta, Georgia, phone number 991M. From the time of birth, one would have thought that a 12 pound baby boy would have grown to be one of the NFL's greatest linebackers, but this would not be so.

As a child, my memory affords me to remember events which took place at the age of three and four. I can remember certain times when my mother and I interacted. In fact, I can recall very well helping my mother with chores around the house and making a mess of things at the same time. I can remember the big black pot used for washing the sheets, stirring them while they boiled and using this special stick which was very smooth. To me, this stick was very special. I can also remember shaking the bottles of milk until it ultimately became real butter. Those formative years were warm and loving.

My first day at school was a disaster. I lived across the street from the old Magnolia Elementary Street School. My only desire at that time in my life was to remain at home with my mother; after all, I was the "baby" in the family.

The first chance I got, across the campus I went, back to my house, only to be sent back to school shortly thereafter. The school was not one of my favorite places. I can understand too well the concerns of a young child being introduced to public education. For the first time, it can be a frightening experience. Little did I know that I would be going back to school. I would be spending the majority of my adult life in and around schools.

We moved away from Lamar Street after the first few months during my first year at Magnolia Elementary School. I was very fortunate to have moved to a neighborhood with more to offer, such as better living conditions and an environment which would be the vehicle used to increase my self-esteem.

My first year in our new home was pleasant and one I will never forget. You would have to be the "baby" of the family in order to understand why I feel that my first adversity was being born the last of eleven children in my family. From where I stood, you could forget hand-me-downs. I was also picked on by my older brothers quite often because, as we all know, "babies try to be in charge," and also because I received most of the attention. I was yet to realize that tragedy would mark my first real test to determine just who really was in charge.

In 1958, my mother passed away after a short illness. There I was, eight years old without a clue as to what was really happening. This was my second adversity. The feeling of alienation set in and a long period of adjustments began. Being the youngest child in the family, my brothers and sisters looked after me. Many times the feeling of loneliness would dominate my thoughts.

To make matters worse, I had a bladder which would not cooperate with me at night. This created another problem—bedwetting. The lack of understanding and support from family didn't make things any easier for me. My situation was embarrassing and frustrating. This problem did not go away. It had to be dealt with, although this problem did not cease until years later. My problem was never addressed from a medical standpoint. In fact, it eventually became a

medical issue. I would never forget certain moments when I felt that there was no help for me. My self-esteem had deteriorated by damaging degrees.

My hat goes off to my sister, Mamie, for stepping in and holding the household together during these trying times. There's a lesson in there somewhere. Although there was no parental authority, per se, in our house, there was respect for one another. This seemed to have replaced what was normally considered obedience to parents. Enough cannot be said about the way Mamie assumed responsibility of rearing three younger brothers, as well as rearing her own children. The word love was rarely spoken around our house, but somehow you just knew love was present.

Another one of my sisters, Dorothy, pitched in towards our care for a while, but she later moved away. We were a close family of siblings, constantly looking out for each other and doing the best we could under the circumstances.

Society would categorize us as poor; however, the mentality we chose to portray was one of lower economic status—not poor. We didn't have much money, but we had each other. At an early age we were taught to put Jesus first in our lives. However, it was up to us to try the Master for ourselves. During my early years, having my mother around, I felt secure and had no fears. My self esteem was somewhat normal for a child well taken care of.

From about the fourth grade to the sixth grade, school adjustments were difficult, and I could only remember surviving that era. With the help of my older brothers, Nathaniel and Jimmy, I learned how to defend myself against the bullies who would

intimidate me. It was nice having these guys around although we had our differences. We are good friends to this day.

I was not academically slow; in fact, with a little studying, I could have been an "A" student. Unfortunately, one could get seasick looking at all the "Cs" on my report cards.

During one point in my life—from about age ten to age fifteen, my friends in my neighborhood became the significant others. School became a real "downer" during this awkward period in my life. My clothes didn't fit, my voice was changing, and all of a sudden, I began taking an interest in girls. Warrick (nickname Tuffy), Ronnie, and Nunnally (now deceased) were my closest friends during this part of my life. Much of our time was spent bonding. We did everything together; we gained popularity among our peers in the neighborhood and at school.

The Lincoln park subdivision was known as the well-to-do area for black citizens in the small town of Valdosta. Many would refer to this community as the "Promised Land." In fact, during the 1960s, Lincoln Park was considered the only middle class black neighborhood in town. There were teachers, factory workers, contractors, and clergymen living in this neighborhood. The streets were paved and street lights lit up the neighborhood at night. The houses were newly constructed.

The death of my older brother Lloyd and the proceeds from his insurance policy afforded my family the opportunity to live in this neighborhood. It was the foresight of my mother, who chose to have a decent place for her children to live. Her adversity became our fortune. Adversity would again resurface

by having to suffer at the hands of some critics in the neighborhood who felt that we didn't belong there.

We didn't have a car or other luxuries; however, we did have good manners, intelligence, and a will to do which compensated for the absence of parental guidance and other things we didn't have. This lack of parental guidance was replaced with compassion from my sister Mamie, from neighbors, from friends and relatives. This type of attention provided the diversity needed to choose the type image or role model which best suited my circumstances. We were not short of role models from which to choose. In fact, in my neighborhood alone, there were over 60 families from which I could select.

One role model in particular was Mr. Joe Rivers. They called him **Dirty Joe**, a nickname which stuck with him from his old football days. Mr. Joe took time from his busy schedule to work with over 100 boys in baseball and football. His efforts to obtain a charter led to several little league baseball teams being sponsored by many commercial companies. We learned a lot more than just the skill of sports. We developed character, moral values, and self-confidence. Mr. Robert Bythwood was another role model in my life. He taught me the things I needed to know about work ethics. We had the most efficient newspaper delivery service in town during those days. For four years I worked with Mr. Bythwood and his son, Ronnie, as we delivered newspapers around town.

Education became the dominant factor in my life. From the ages of 15 through 17, knowing what you wanted to be in life was pretty much decided upon by many of my peers; however, this was not the case with me. I knew my chances of attending college were

slim. Therefore, my only "out" at that time was to enlist into the military. Self-esteem once again became the focal point during this era. I continued to develop through my late teens.

Many adversities emerged; for instance, the lack of transportation to go out on dates and the lack of leisure time just to relax and so forth did not happen. I had to work for the things a typical teenager wanted. Making my own money and finding time for extracurricular activities was a pretty good balance for any teenager. Keep in mind the fact that peers could either make you or break you with their norms.

Among our peers was a thing called **the Dozens**. This was the thing to do for laughs. Although name calling and publicly criticizing one's mother was a means to reduce a person's demeanor, the intentions were not to degrade but to see how people could handle ridicule all in the name of humor. Today, there can be no humor found in degrading one's mother.

As a student in a segregated educational institution, many important values were taught. Although my lack of concentration toward academic preparation was evident, I would strive to attain a foothold in higher education in the years to follow. The years at Pinevale High School were both enjoyable and beneficial. Many lasting relationships would be maintained. On the other hand, junior high was a different ball game and I would be remiss if I didn't share a couple of stories of the days from my junior and high school experiences.

To mention a couple of awkward times, my first after-school social dance took place in the 6th grade where boys would sit on one side of the room and girls would sit on the other side. That long walk

across the gym floor to ask a girl to dance was one of my most frightening moments. As I approached the group of girls to ask one in particular for a dance, my hands were wet with sweat and my heart was in my throat. And the fear of rejection was always present. Fortunately, this one young lady accepted my request for a dance, and for the first time, I thought I was in love. On another occasion in the seventh grade, bad news seemed to be the only news. At first, my teacher was diagnosed with cancer; and to top that off, that same year while sitting in class, the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated. For me, these years consisted of gloom and doom. Mr. J. L. Lomax became a living legend in education in the black community and abroad, but this period was one of the lowest points in my life as far as self-esteem was concerned.

When I became a freshman at Pinevale High, changes took place that boosted my self-esteem in many ways. I felt pretty good about myself and it didn't matter what others thought about me anymore.

I became good at many things. Determining what a person does well and complimenting them makes for a good morale booster, confidence-builder, and self-esteem developer. In high school I was considered an average student. As far as being a popular kid, I was above average.

From my youth experiences I was able to excel in the social arena and eventually became a city government official. It was in the sporting arena that I would develop a summer athletic program for the Georgia Sheriff's Boys Ranch. Being athletically active enabled me to continue participating in sports activities well

into my forties. It was in the music arena that I would eventually assume the responsibility of song leader for the River Street Church of Christ. It was in the area of leadership that I would excel in the United States Air Force for over a decade, and eventually excel as an educational and spiritual leader. It all began to come together; all of my strengths became the vehicle for becoming a well rounded and productive citizen. After all, this is what society expects of us when we hold down a job and pay our share of taxes.

2

Those Awkward Adolescent Years

It is now the height of the Civil Rights era and much talk is expressed concerning integration. As a 14 year old, segregation was a way of life with the colored bathrooms, the back seat on the bus, and the take out services where blacks could not sit and eat their meals. This entire era did absolutely nothing for my self-esteem in a positive way; however, for once, I knew I was not alone.

Our school, Pinevale High School, was not only a place to achieve academic heights, but a place to meet, socialize and to either develop self-esteem or retard it. With a school population of approximately 500 black students, one would have to brace oneself for the cruelty students, from time to time, inflicted upon each other.

In fact, I realized that respect was one way I could avoid the ridicule from certain peers. As a member of the Jazzmen Club, (a club designed for young black males aspiring to be successful in life), I received that certain respect. We were symbols of ambition and potential amongst our peers. Of a total of 14 members, nine of us earned college degrees. Here again, an example was set by peer association. A person should not only strive to survive but should also strive to develop a desire to achieve.

My adversities were transformed into achievements. Money was always scarce, and knowing that college at that time was not a consideration upon graduation, I immediately joined the Armed Forces at the age of 17, four days after graduation from high school. At that time, this decision appeared to be in my best interest. Many of my friends would speak of their plans for the future and the exciting new experiences they looked forward to encountering. My only

desire was to remove myself from the situation.

I was particularly interested in the Air Force because the educational opportunities were more accessible. The ability to remain at one duty station for years at the time was an advantage. This held to be true because I was stationed at Homestead Air Force Base for approximately seven consecutive years. Being a member of the Armed Forces had its advantages and disadvantages.

From the beginning of my military career, basic training was one place I will never forget. Hot scorching days in Texas, someone yelling at me most of the time, and early rises in the morning. Yes, basic training was really back to the basics for me. For some, this experience was really an adversity. For me, this was an opportunity to excel once again.

Studying became a real habit. After attending several technical schools, I thought I was ready to take on any university. This was not quite true. For you see, college was a horse of a different color. At Pinevale High I really didn't apply myself academically. I had lots of fun and thought very little about the importance of education at that time.

As the years passed by, I realized that I was leaving something special behind: the warm relationships, a part of my life that was really worth experiencing, one worth sharing, and one with real meaning. Certain situations made this era special, although segregation was a reality, our focus was primarily on each other. Lessons were being taught much of the time, such as going to church on a regular basis, participating in extracurricular activities at school during the school year, building school spirit, respecting oneself and others, especially our elders. Some would

refer to the term "from the old school." My self-esteem grew by leaps and bounds. Although still shielded from the real world, we were able to develop our personalities without witnessing the outright racism against blacks at that time. Valdosta, in itself, was segregated to the point where the only contact we had with whites were with the store operators, the insurance man, the rent man, or the man himself (police).

Sports were the things to do back then. We were not into many organized sports; therefore, we had to improvise. Even dating back to the 1950s, there was a genuine desire to excel in sports. There were times when I felt that I gave it my best, but I had to suffer ridicule from fellow teammates and even from one of my coaches. This was an adversity I had chosen. Fortunately, I profited a great deal by overcoming these barriers. As youngsters we were acquainted with men like Mr. Rivers, who taught us passion for the games, the late Mr. Edward Jones, who taught us the desire to be champions, and the late Mr. Jack Bethea, who taught us that everyone deserves a chance to compete.

On weekends we would walk for miles to other neighborhoods just to engage in a game of tackle football (sandlot), a basketball game, or a baseball game until we began playing organized sports. Nowadays we have gangs replacing the innocence of turf claiming with bloodshed. In the sports arena, we had a burning desire to play the "original" Valdosta Wildcats. It would have been a great game. Even if the teams had merged, opportunities would have existed for many of our deserving students at Pinevale High School.

Very few scouts came to our school to evaluate our football team. Boy, did they miss some great games! Not only did these games provide an outlet for many of our black citizens in the community, but they gave us a sense of ownership, dignity, and a sense of pride. I guess you could call it school and community spirit.

As the time grew near and the moment of departure was at hand, it was time to reflect, to reminisce on the great times I had as a student at Pinevale High School. For it was a time that I learned what true spirit really meant. I will never forget those fall seasons after school when we would see a school parade each Friday evening. It seems as though the entire black community stepped out on their front porches to watch the mighty Tigers march by. Children followed the marching band for the entire route, dancing along the way. By nightfall they would come together to witness another fun-filled evening watching the Tigers football team go to battle, and to listen to great sounds performed by the band.

Competition among the basketball ranks was stiff. I was a 4-foot guard playing on an almost average 6-foot team, except for Tuffy or Leeboy, who were two of our star guards. Just watching these guys play was really something to write home about. Trying to hold my own as I competed for a position on the varsity basketball team was a real test of confidence for me. However, shifting to singing one of the Dells old tunes, **Stay In My Corner**, to a packed gymnasium, to winning a science fair, and serving as one of the Jazzmen increased my self-esteem and helped me get through my most difficult years.

Facing real bills each month, being responsible, and many of the morals and values that I learned

were about to be put to use. Never before did the mountain seem so high or the valley so low. One decision after another, one mistake after another. Adversities on every hand. My self-esteem was once again reduced to an all-time low with all the imperfections I carried along with me, not knowing which adversity I would have to overcome from one day to another. I learned that consistency was necessary in order to sustain a certain quality of life. Most young people nowadays think getting to be eighteen is the magic number, where things all of a sudden became clearer and we now know all the answers. It's quite to the contrary as you will encounter as I share the experiences of an awkward time in my life.

3

As A Young Adult

At age 18 the thought of being an adult was on my mind. I thought that making my own decisions, traveling around the country and "sowing my oats" was what being grown-up was all about. However, the Air Force actually became my surrogate parents, employer and a way to grow as an individual. Being a grown-up was once again put on hold. During my first term in the military my life was plagued with financial stress, a failed marriage, and nothing to show for the first four years of my military experience, except for two healthy children, Willie, Jr., and Yorshia Eurlon, whom I love dearly.

Also, during these challenging four years I had this unforgettable twelve month tour in sunny Vietnam. I grew up a bit during that year and my life changed to a point where I would never see things in the same light ever again. Seven days a week, twelve hours a day, the scorching sun became our companion; bearing down on us from early morning until late evening. And when it was not 110 degrees on the average, we had rain storms every day like clock work. The monsoon season lasted nearly five months. The mosquitoes grew larger and larger and were everywhere. We slept under nets every night. The foreign culture was not appreciated at the time, and being unable to speak the language became an adversity.

The negative perception that the Vietnamese people had for all Americans—especially toward the black soldiers—once again created a self-esteem problem, not only for me but for an entire race of young men and women who participated in that conflict. This prejudice along with the fear of being attacked by the North and South Vietnamese people by way of

rocket attacks, sniper fire, and sabotage provided all the adversities I could imagine for one year of my young adult life. For instance, the person who might work alongside you during the day could very well be the person firing the rockets upon you that very same night. We were never safe. I began to reevaluate life as it presented itself at that time and I questioned our presence in that country. I witnessed several commercial airlines transporting barrels of oil out of the country by way of our air base. I believe I became interested in politics at that time. I also began to see others different than myself in a new light, even toward my white counterparts who I shared this Vietnam experience with. To this day, there are white and black veterans keeping in touch with each other.

Following the Vietnam tour, many of us were reassigned to stateside bases. I, along with about five other airmen, was assigned to southern California. There, I began to readjust to the "real world." For a young man coming from a small town, Los Angeles was more than exciting. However, I was able to adjust to my new environment very well. I had few or no problems living in southern California except for the smog. In fact, the smog was so thick at times that I could barely see the sun. Breathing was very difficult. Although my stay was just under two years, time spent there was somewhat positive.

By this time I was about to complete my first four years of military service. You can say that those first four years in the military were all experimental. I accomplished very little as far as personal growth in any way. Also, at that time my distant marriage was failing. A desperate decision was made in order to salvage what was left of the marriage. Being relocated to

Homestead, Florida, was the last effort. Of course, this effort failed and divorce was inevitable. Not only did my self-esteem submerge, but my economic situation submerged as well. It was at this time when I knew that changes had to be made.

In the meantime I was able to develop a relationship with Willie Jr. and Yorshia. We spent much time together, along with their three cousins, whom I called the little rascals. Everywhere Willie and Yorshia went, these three cousins would be there also. This occurred from the time these children were about five years old until their early adolescent years. In this particular area, the adversity of being a distant father was not a hindrance but an opportunity for me to develop a lifelong relationship with my children.

After a number of setbacks, I made a decision to reevaluate my life once again. I decided to look to the future and concluded that I should enroll in college. After completing a Bachelor's Degree, I thought that maybe the military would not be so bad as an officer, but after three failed attempts to enter officer training school, it was evident by this time that the Air Force would not be a career option. It was obvious that preparation for civilian life had to be made. I would remain in the Air Force a total of 10-1/2 years. By attending night classes I earned the Bachelors Degree in Sociology from St. Leo College, St. Leo, Florida; a Masters Degree from Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, California; and later engaged in post graduate work at Nova University, Ft. Lauderdale, Fl.

My most memorable experience in my educational endeavor during my last year in the military was when I applied for the Bootstrap Program and was granted one year to attend the college of my choice in

order to complete the Bachelors Degree. Although I was able to complete this program and I was awarded the Bachelors Degree with honors, I had to return to duty as an enlisted member. This experience was shared by family members as far away as Detroit, Michigan; after all, I was the first member of my family of eleven to receive a college degree.

The military could have been an adversity for some, but for me it was a blessing. Even though after being denied acceptance into the Officers Training Program three times in an 18-month period, this in itself was a blessing because had I been accepted, I would not have done the things which would mark the beginning of a new era in my home town. In fact, on one occasion, my commanding officer once said to me, "Son, you're not officer material." This was the second time I would personally encounter discrimination and prejudice. I was determined to prove this individual wrong, and that quality was first and foremost in my life. My third attempt was made as a last effort. I accepted that fact that my military experience was coming to an end. I contacted one of the highest ranking officers in the Air Force, Brigadier General Chappy James, in an attempt to strengthen my case. This effort also failed and I made a decision to reach for the sky as a civilian. On December 10, 1979, a quest for civilian employment was underway.

Somewhere during the last few years of my military career, there also came a time for me to take inventory of my spiritual life. The condition of my soul and my religious convictions became the focal point in my life. This passage came to me quite often—**Train Up A Child The Way He Shall Go And When He Is Old He Shall Not Depart From It**

(Proverbs 22: 6), the word of God, that is. After much deliberation, and after visiting several congregations in the area, I found my way back to the Church that Christ built (in reference to the Church of Christ). I repented of my sins, confessed that Jesus Christ is the son of God, and was baptized. This was the beginning of a new relationship with God. This relationship continues today.

My first civilian job came when I began to experiment with selling insurance. That transition was smooth but unpredictable. As a non-commissioned officer association counselor, I was able to maintain a relationship with the military life while adjusting to civilian life. My first civilian job was short-lived, however. A three-day bout with depression gave way to an attempt to learn the game of golf. Every Wednesday morning, my co-workers would encourage me to join them for a game of golf. All of these guys were military retired. They enjoyed the life of part-time work and part-time golf. I began to realize that a different field of employment was probably going to be my next move.

Finances were at an all time low. The current bills and child support were obligations that had to be met. This situation was the primary cause of the bout with depression. Changing jobs made all the difference in the world. I began to evaluate the job market once again. With very little to choose from in south Florida, I began to look toward a career in education as a possible choice. Private schools were plentiful in the area. It was at this point that a decision was made to take a closer look at education as a career move.

4

Giving Back Just A Little

My two years at Sunrise Community Center for exceptional children was one of my greatest challenges. I can still remember working with what was then simply called "retarded children." At Sunrise, I did a number of jobs, from driving the children around to making purchases for them as a purchase agent. My challenge was working with clients who could not speak, could not hear, or comprehend spoken language. Everything had to be done for them. These young people were categorized as having the lowest form of human development.

I knew that this was not just a job but a calling to help people who could not help themselves. This was my first real opportunity to give just a little something back to humanity. These individuals were functioning similarly to the lower form of animal. When they hurt, a certain mannerism would be noticed.

I received three promotions in 12 months. First I was a driver, then I became villa manager, and from there I became purchasing agent. But I realized that my tenure at Sunrise was almost over because had I been promoted any higher, I would have replaced my boss. Realizing that my experience at Sunrise was more than just a job, a feeling of gratitude came over me because I felt blessed in being mentally and physically fit to live a normal life without having to depend on others.

During this same time period, I was able to complete 18 months of doctoral studies in Public Administration at Nova University in the afternoons and on weekends. However, completion of the program required satisfactorily meeting academic grading standards with a "B" or better in all subjects. My doctoral studies came to an abrupt end when I was

confronted by a former Nixon administration member who stated to me on one occasion that, "You are not working on a doctorate level and you shouldn't be in this program." That statement marked the second form of personal discrimination and/or prejudice I had experienced since the military days. I felt helpless; all appeals were exhausted. I eventually withdrew from the program with 18 months of study that I would never directly use and a $5,000 student loan that had to be repaid over the next few years.

With the trend moving rapidly toward the Hispanic culture all around me in South Florida, very few job opportunities were available to me. This was an opportune time for me to consider relocating back to my home town. I made a number of short trips back to my home town to prospect for jobs. There was one situation which gave me hope, so I began focusing on the one positive interview which would give me the encouragement I needed to move back home.

5

Georgia On My Mind

There were times when I longed to see the moonlight through the tall Georgia pine trees. There were evenings when I would sit outside at night during my stay in the Miami area and enjoy the beautiful night scenery. I figure it was a pretty good tradeoff at the time. After all, that same moonlight gleamed through both the Florida palms and the Georgia pines. I would often listen to two of my favorite songs, "Georgia On My Mind," and "A Rainy Night In Georgia." At times a sudden feeling of loneliness would overcome me. I strongly felt that one day the time would come when I would return to Georgia. I did return to Georgia with only the items I needed and everything else was left behind. My most difficult task was leaving my two children in Florida. There was very little to say to my children about the move except for the fact that I was not abandoning them and that I loved them very much. We would continue to build our relationship for many years to come.

My goals weren't quite clear at the time I relocated back home to Georgia, and there was no timeline for me to follow. My first few weeks back home were occupied with other job interviews because my one sure lead fell through. After about three months of substituting in the Valdosta City School System and doing a little writing for a local newspaper, I realized that job opportunities were few and far between. This process of seeking employment continued throughout the summer of 1981.

During the time I was seeking gainful employment, I was also seeking companionship. After all, having someone to go through the ups and downs with adds a little comfort to any unpleasant situation. After a brief time of meeting new people and

rekindling old acquaintances, I became reacquainted with Cleopatra (Pat) Sanders, an old flame from our high school days. After a moderate courtship, Pat and I were married and we began to build a wonderful life together.

Finally, I was able to gain employment with the Lowndes County school system as a Chapter I Reading and Math instructor, and tutor for the Georgia Sheriffs Boys Ranch. This position was one which had never been considered to be a full time position. Not only did I become the first certified instructor employed full time, but also the first minority who had ever held a full time position at the Ranch. This, in itself, was another challenge for my self-esteem and an adversity for me to overcome because all the students were of the Caucasian persuasion, except for three minority students. All of the employees were white, too, with the exception of the cook and the counselor.

The first impression I gave the students was one of importance and that I had a job to do. In just a short time, my acceptance by the boys was eased a little primarily because of my athletic abilities. My second challenge was getting the students to trust me. The majority of these students were children who were either rejected by their parents, the school systems, or just could not be cared for by their natural parents. Many times the criminal justice system had given these boys a last chance by placing them at the Ranch before their behavior caused them to be incarcerated.

Many of these students had a history of making trouble for themselves wherever they went. Picture this if you will; in every classroom there seems to be at least one or two students who have problems

beyond the norm. These students defy authority. They steal, use profanity and display behavior which would be considered antisocial. I worked with all of these students five days a week. There were no substitutes available when I was absent from work.

There were many lessons to be learned from working at the Boys Ranch. It was during my tenure there that I first became concerned for my community, and it was during this time great gains were made in my community, as well as at the Ranch. The education program became a model for other Georgia and Florida youth homes. During that seven-year period, students at the Ranch graduated from high school in record numbers. Many furthered their education by attending college and vocational schools. Some joined the military as a means of promoting personal development. Gains were made in the area of self-esteem. Over and over again the success stories would mount during my tenure at the Boys Ranch.

6

Reconstruction Of The 80s

My concern for the community's problems grew from the need to establish a reading program, to revitalize the NAACP organization in 1985, and to work toward fair representation in the political arena. I began to work toward establishing Valdosta's first Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) program. This program provided approximately 4,000 books to children during the summer months. A few of my friends and I became concerned about the literacy problem in our community and we were able to address this problem among our youth. Much good came from this effort.

As vice president of the NAACP Chapter, I was able to work closely with others in the community who had complaints about the political system, high unemployment, and nearly every other problem one could think of. My tenure as vice president was short lived. After I met with friends like Iris Dubard and Tony Daniels, I realized that the problems I encountered were not just personal problems, but were social problems in general. We joined our forces together and developed an organization from which to vent our frustrations. The Winnersville Coalition Consultants was born and we began to act as vanguards toward correcting some of the ills of our community.

The organization's first mission was to conduct research on the political structure to determine if something could be done about modern day taxation without representation. This problem was obvious because there were approximately 40% minority/black residents living in Valdosta. However, there were no minority/black representatives on the city council, county commission, nor the boards of education on the city or county level. There was one black

citizen who had previously served on the city council. Mrs. Ruth K. Council served an appointed term and won an at-large election the following election year. One black had served on the Valdosta Board of Education. Mr. Clayton Barron served an appointed term as a school board member and later declined to run for another term. And there were perhaps two black citizens who served on various boards around the city.

The effort to push for fair representation began with the concern for closing the only fire station located on the south side of town, which just happened to be in the heart of the south side. This concern grew into an all-out effort to confront City Hall during a regularly scheduled meeting. A study was provided to Mayor and Council which supported maintaining the fire station on the south side. This effort along with support from the community proved to be fruitful. It was from this point that a drive to change the political makeup of the City of Valdosta had begun.

Other groups such as the Citizens Awareness, the Ministerial Alliance, the Black Citizens Action Group, and the NAACP played critical roles in bringing about political change; however, this effort probably would not have been accomplished without the litigation sponsored by the Georgia Legal Services during the eighties. The Black Community Action Group (BCAG) organized and initiated litigation to integrate the Valdosta school board in the seventies, but their efforts were to no avail.

The efforts led by Winnersville Coalition Consultations would not only challenge the school board but the city council and county commission as well. Massive voter registration rallies were held

throughout the city and full use of the media was solicited. Upon writing more than 30 letters to the editor in the local newspaper, a sense of consciouness began to rise.

During the 1984 city council election, I had the privilege to run for Post 1. My opponent was Mrs. Bette Becthel, a veteran council member of 14 years, and a professor of Biology at Valdosta State College (now University). I lost to Mrs. Becthel by a 2-to-1 margin. This experience became raw data which served as evidence to support the notion that blacks had little chance of being elected to public office under the at-large voting system.

After 22 months of deliberating this case in court, Judge Wilber Owens accepted a plan which the coalitions could support. The method of voting would be changed from the at-large system to wards and districts, with three black districts for city council, one black district for the county commission and four black districts for the Valdosta Board of Education. No attempt was made at that time to integrate the Lowndes County Board of Education due to the sparsely populated black residents in the county. The lack of representation would be addressed at a later date. Although the controversy of accepting this plan was intensive by both the community and the NAACP, the Winnersville Coalition Consultants had the last word in accepting the plan and did so with enthusiasm. A special election was held on February 14, 1985. Elected for one-year terms on city council were: Bunnis "B" Williams, Joseph "Sonny" Vickers, and myself. Elected to the Valdosta City Board of Education were Donald "Butch" Williams, Minnie Martin, and Jaqueline "Jackie" Brown. Mr. Willie

Jones would later be elected to serve in the Super 4 District, totaling four black board members on the board of education. Mr. Alvin Payton was elected to the county commission. This endeavor not only served as a victory for black elected officials, but through this effort, blacks were appointed to other city and county boards which had never been held by minority members in the past.

This election not only made local news, but state, national and even global news via an article published in the May 13, 1985, issue of Jet Magazine. This was among the many proud moments for me. I can recall having a conversation with a friend from my hometown eight years prior to relocating to Valdosta, that a time would come when Valdosta would be placed on the map, not for something negative, but for something positive. I even named the magazine. Years later, it was brought to my attention that this revelation was accurate.

As I began to build on the experiences of serving my community, one proud moment came when the Valdosta Housing Authority gave our small community action group the approval to clean out an old building which was used for storage and convert this building to a study hall for the children in the Hudson Dockett community and surrounding areas. Not only did this building serve as a study hall, but a daycare center as well. Finally, an agreement was made with the housing authority to maintain its status by renovating the building through a six million dollar grant awarded to renovate the entire housing project. The Center now operates with full-time paid staff.

As time passed, many accomplishments were made by the now integrated councils and boards.

These accomplishments included fair and adequate housing, improved hiring and promotion opportunities, a complete overhaul of the infrastructure, better pay for city employees, and fair representation for black citizens in Valdosta and Lowndes County as a whole. Many obstacles had to be overcome in order to accommodate the makeup of the newly elected council and board members. Changing the city's charter had to take place to reflect the now diversified council.

I can recall many times when my deodorant completely quit on me when an issue had to be addressed and the thought of little or no support was always an issue. This was hardly a comfortable situation to be in. For instance I can recall a time when the Affirmative Action Program was in jeopardy nationwide, and about that same time I had to promote the idea of affirmative action to the council as a viable method of confronting problems associated with the promotion and hiring policy of the city. After much time spent debating the issue, a workable policy was introduced which would adequately address these problems. As a result of this effort, more black policemen, firemen and city employees were hired and promoted than in any other time in the history of Valdosta. Likewise, our first black department head was hired and the Parks and Recreation Department gained minority leadership as well.

It was about this time that once again my self-confidence and self-esteem began to soar to great heights, and I began to understand how self-esteem fits into the scheme of things. We really do care about what people think of us. How people perceive us lends itself to our growth and development. During the

same time I was experiencing these heights of self-confidence, I would also experience times of low self-confidence. For no victory would be achieved without a real fight for my beliefs.

By this time the skills used in coping with life's challenges were now a bit different from that of earlier times. For instance, during my childhood years, acceptance by my peers became the focus. During my young adult years, many of society's norms and role models became the "peer," and once again, acceptance became the main factor. Many would say that by the time I reached my early adult years, I was "trying to keep up with the Joneses." Some undesirable choices were made on a regular basis during those times. However, the time came when I was councilman of District 1 that I was doing everything right.

Many things done for the first time were accomplished which also placed me and my fellow black councilmen in the spotlight. For example, the black and white councilmen would attend the various conferences around the country. All of a sudden, travel for the black council members became an issue. Many insiders began to scrutinize how black councilmen spent the taxpayers' dollars by traveling to the various conferences and meetings which was of a governmental nature. Never before had this been an issue when there were all white council members. This was just one of the many unwarranted criticisms made against the newly elected black council members.

My first year on city council was spent in training sessions and simply learning about policy and procedures. Enjoying the sweet taste of victory after an intense campaign was rarely the focus. I had no problems at all with my self-confidence or self-esteem at

that time either. I began to play the part of the new vanguard proudly.

After being re-elected to the post of District 1 in 1986, it was now time to analyze the gains and improvements thus far. I realized that this term would probably be my last effort to serve the community in this capacity. It was understood that other areas of the city charter and its policies had to be addressed and perhaps changed in some way or another.

Jet Magazine *May 13, 1985*

• Six Blacks were recently elected by Valdosta, Georgia's new district voting system. Below, City Councilman Willie Houseal takes oath as his wife, Cleopatra, looks on.

7

You Be The Judge This Time

Amongst the many honors I received during my tenure as council member, two such honors in particular came when I had the opportunity to serve as the first black male Mayor Pro Tem in Valdosta, Georgia. I had the privilege of representing the city at a number of functions in the mayor's stead. Cutting ribbons, presenting proclamations, and presiding over several council meetings was exciting and not once did I view this duty as a burden.

As in the past, these honors did not present themselves without controversy. It appeared that any effort which placed the black council member in the forefront would not go unnoticed by the status quo. It was established in the past that only the at-large council members were eligible for the Mayor Pro Tem position. With the make-up of the voting public, the at-large position would practically yield a white candidate each time due to the polarized voting practices. Consequently, it was unlikely that a black council member would serve in this capacity. This change which took place was definitely needed, primarily for two reasons: number one, I had a strong desire to serve in this capacity and number two, the door would be opened for other black council members after me. It was an honor to be the first black male council member to serve in this capacity.

One particular duty of Mayor Pro Tem was to serve as municipal court judge in the absence of the regular appointed judge. After a couple of dry runs, my day finally came to sit on the bench. It was as real as anything you could imagine, the caseload was heavy, and attorneys were all lined up in an effort to represent their clients. After a few short moments as judge, I realized that something was wrong with this

picture. Many of my constituents were sitting in the courtroom waiting for me to hear their cases.

I quickly concluded that this endeavor would be political suicide. Friends and acquaintances were sitting, staring, and wondering how their case would turn out. It wasn't difficult to try these cases because the answer was right in front of me. I just went by the book on each case. I guess you could say, "I threw the book at everyone who appeared before the court." This practice, in my opinion, had to be changed. Because legal issues were becoming more complicated and cut and dried answers were fading fast, my idea of change would be to appoint an attorney to serve in the absence of the regular appointed municipal court judge, thus allowing for competency to exist on a continuous basis. My only concern in this matter would be to afford the opportunity for a black attorney to serve in this capacity.

The end results would yield the first black attorney to serve as assistant municipal court judge. Mr. James Council continues to serve in this capacity to this day. It would be three years later when a young man would approach me on the street and immediately call to my attention that his experience as a defendant in my court would change the way he would conduct himself in the public forever. For the book was thrown at him for fighting in public. I made the city approximately seven thousand dollars in fines that day; not a bad day for a rookie judge who had never picked up a law book in his entire life.

Attorney Jim Smith Confers With Judge Houseal

Houseal Takes Bench Reluctantly

by ERNIE ROGERS, VALDOSTA TIMES CITY EDITOR

The 50 to 75 people in the crowded municipal courtroom rose as reluctant Municipal Court Judge Willie Houseal took the bench here this morning for the first time.

Houseal served the court today in his capacity as Mayor Pro Tem of Valdosta. The mayor pro tem has traditionally sat in for the regular city court judge when other duties of the lawyer so designated prevent him from hearing the cases.

Houseal arrived at the Valdosta Police Department a few minutes before the scheduled 9 a.m. convening for briefings. At 9:10 a.m., after conferring with lawyers for several of the offenders, Houseal took the bench and explained the legal processes involved in appearing before the court.

The defendants had quieted from the nervous laughter and conversation that filled the courtroom before the judge entered. Now they wiped their palms on trousers and skirts and (those who had them) looked hopefully at their attorneys.

Houseal began to hear the cases that included driving under the influence, other traffic offenses, housing code violations, disorderly conduct and other violations of city ordinances.

Houseal had hoped to not serve as municipal court judge and in fact is on the leading edge of a movement to have a budget item approved that will fund another attorney to serve when the judge cannot appear.

Houseal and his fellow councilmen Bunnis Williams and Sonny Vickers are in favor of the budget allocation for various reasons. Among them the political ramifications of sentencing and imposing fines on constituents.

8

Meeting Celebrities

On a number of occasions I had the privilege to meet and mingle with people we could only see on television. In fact, there were times when I shared the spotlight with famous people. There was a time when Pat and I traveled to Seattle, Washington, to attend a conference. As we were going to our room, we met Beau Bridges in the elevator and he was polite enough to give us his autograph. Kenny G was on a street corner in Atlanta, and a casual hello was in order. A number of Boston Celtics basketball players shared an elevator with us in Atlanta. We had dinner with Dick Gregory in Las Vegas, spent several hours hosting Ron O'Neal while filming the movie, **As Summers Die**, in our city. On a number of occasions, Andy Young and I conversed about municipal matters during the time he served as mayor of Atlanta. A casual conversation with Sally Jessy Raphael was pleasant. She was also kind enough to sign an autograph for me.

We dined with the former Governor Joe Frank Harris, met with several senators, congressmen and state representatives. In fact, it's been rather nice getting a Christmas card from our former Secretary of State, Max Cleland—who is now a U.S. Senator—every year since I was first elected to city council. Mr. George Bush did not overlook the fact that as councilman, just perhaps I would be interested in attending the inauguration in 1988. I appreciated getting the invitation to Washington on such a memorable occasion but I had to pass it up.

Another proud moment came when I met two giants in their respective fields. As Pat and I arrived in Las Vegas for a municipal conference at two a.m., it seemed natural to run into Redd Foxx at the blackjack

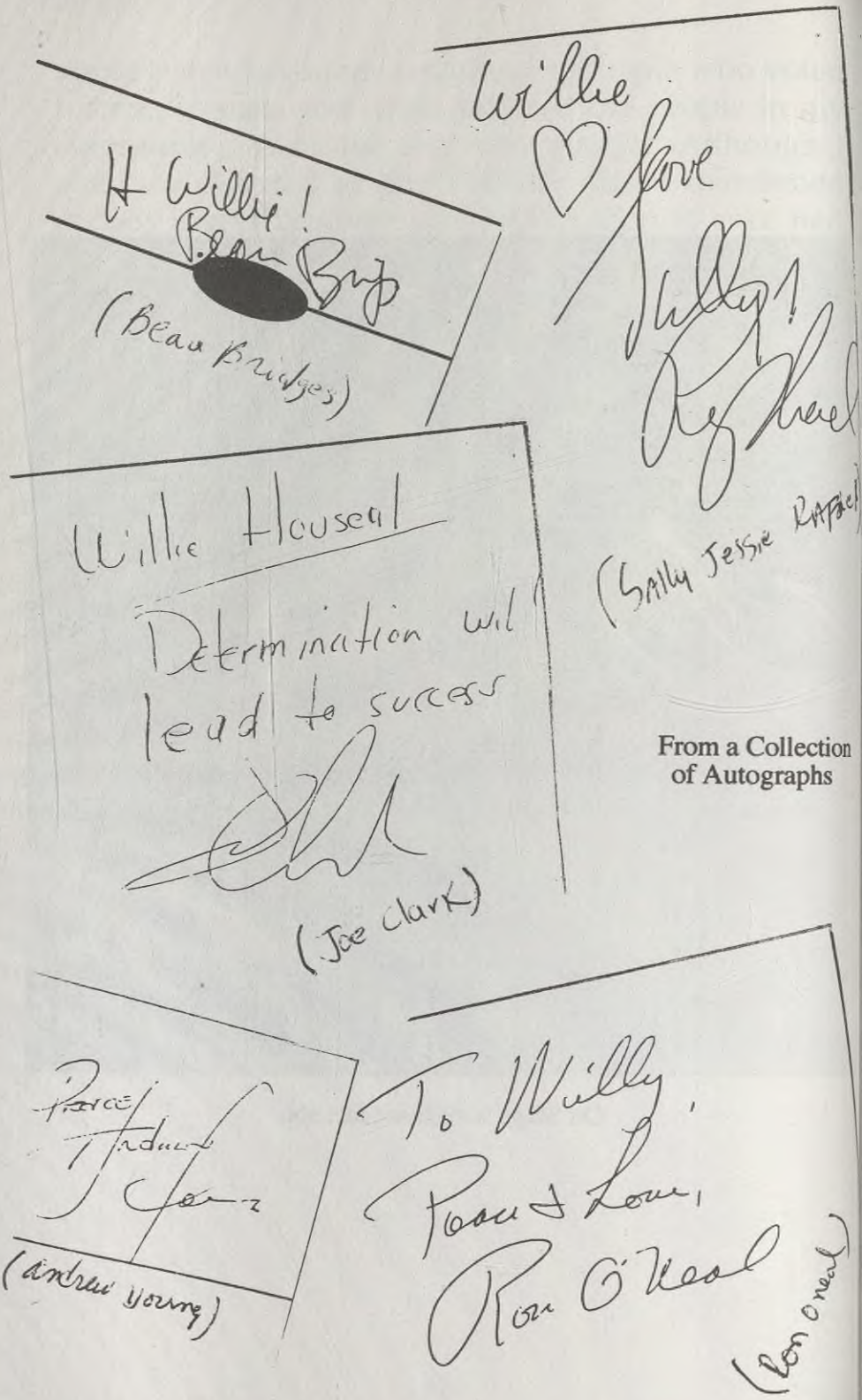
tables downstairs in the hotel where we were staying. A cordial greeting was in order. During the same visit in Vegas, Mr. George Foreman was about to make his comeback of the decade at 40 years of age. Mr. Foreman worked his way back to being one of the top contenders in the heavyweight division and fought Evander Holyfield and Mike Tyson. This aged fighter eventually regained the heavyweight championship of the world. This was a long road traveled from just standing in front of the hotel in warmups and watching people pass by without the fanfare and the spotlight. In fact, people hardly recognized him. However, Pat and I had a short conversation with him and wished him the best in his comeback effort.

Another one of my proudest moments of rubbing elbows with celebrities came when I served on a voters rally program at Valdosta State College (now University), with none other than Jesse Jackson. The worst thing about this experience was having to present my speech after Mr. Jackson had moved the audience in such a invigorating manner. Half the audience followed Mr. Jackson right out of the auditorium as he prepared to leave for the airport. Even though there were only a handful of people who remained behind, I presented my speech anyway and I will always remember sharing the spotlight with this great man.

There were several great moments which I will never forget because these were unique experiences which were less likely to have happened, if not for the opportunity afforded to me as a city councilman by traveling with the city council. Although I was able to mingle with the rich and famous from time to time, there were also common people I would meet on the

street every day in my community. People who voted for me. I guess you could say that the people in my community made me feel very special. Although I was not elevated to the celebrity status mentioned earlier, my self-esteem was higher than it ever had been before. I was not being looked up to as some would assume, but I was respected in such a manner which would make anyone feel good about themselves. This was a good time for me and for all who would share the memorable moments of being a city official in my hometown.

On Stage with Jesse Jackson



From a Collection
of Autographs

9

Getting Down To Business

As a member of the Valdosta City Council, I found this endeavor to be both a blessing and a privilege. From the beginning I felt it necessary to work toward things that would improve the standard of living in my community. There were no set goals or timelines as to how these things should be accomplished. I only knew that my purpose was to concentrate on those things which could be changed for the better. In the beginning, areas of concentration were infrastructure and fair housing practices, fair employment practices and crime.

From the time when we were children growing up in Valdosta, we would tolerate the dirt roads and unlighted streets in our neighborhoods. To my knowledge there were only about ten (10) paved streets in all the black neighborhoods combined. It was common for us to travel these dirt roads whether the conditions were hot and dusty or wet and muddy. Although several attempts were made to petition the city to pave the streets, these areas received little or no attention. When the storms would knock down trees and limbs in our city, the black neighborhoods would be last in receiving the attention they needed. We were second class citizens in our own hometown. It wasn't until blacks were elected to the council did the establishment concede to the paving project concept. There were approximately 26 miles of unpaved street throughout the black community.

The concentration of improving infrastructure was primarily on the north side of town where few or no blacks lived. In the past, paving projects were accomplished through a property assessment program. Residents had to pay by the footage of their property to have their street paved in front of their homes.

There was a waiting list for streets to be paved in our community. However, black citizens were hardly ever on the list during the decade of the 70s. It was during this time that a major paving program was sponsored by the federal government which awarded the cities with a revenue sharing program. Cities would use this money for paving streets and repairing bridges. This program was responsible for approximately five (5) miles of dirt streets to be paved in the black community.

Paving was not the only service denied to us by the establishment. There were no street lights in many black neighborhoods. Garbage and trash pickup was poor and street maintenance was deplorable. There was plenty to do on the city council and time was indeed important. With the many changes taking place within the political structure, the focus was on hardcore problems of the city and the attempt to address them was ongoing.

The importance of following through was equally important. In fact, citizens were aware of the efforts put forth in these endeavors because it was the citizens who brought these things to our attention. I am reminded of the time when concern grew for victims of crime in our community. It seemed that criminals were getting all the attention, when in fact, the victims not only suffered but were carried through a legal maze that would complicate even the most informed citizens. My concern for a Victim Assistance program in our city became a priority. Fourteen months later we established our first program with one full-time director and a secretary. It is my hope that I never become a victim. However, if by chance I am, I know just where to go for assistance.

During my tenure as a councilman, many positive things took place. I remember our first city garbage collectors' uprising. I really could not call it a strike because it didn't last long enough to cause a major problem. It was the day after Christmas, when the level of trash would be at its highest. The garbage workers of the city chose not drive their trash trucks that day. I was contacted while in the process preparing to go hunting with my brother. Nathaniel and I went to meet with the workers. It was very early and cold that morning. Nathaniel wanted to offer suggestions as to how to handle the problem, since he was a shop steward on his job. But I had my own plan. For you see, these men had no job protection in a situation like this. There were those on the council who wanted to contract the garbage and trash services to a private company. I feared for the workers who were born and reared in our city. Their jobs would be in jeopardy. As I climbed on top of one of the trucks, I listened to their concerns and asked the men to give me some time to organize a committee to study the conditions of the city workers. Later that day trash was picked up. The committee looked at areas such as promotions, raises, working conditions, and human relation policies. The results of this study was a positive one. On the other hand, I had to consider compromising in order to accomplish many goals that had been reached. Other projects such as an additional softball field, new playground equipment, a picnic shelter and bar-b-que pits were added at Scott Park, a popular gathering placed in the black community. All of these improvements took place in a relatively short period of time. All across the city high intensity crime lights were installed in black neighborhoods. City

workers gained promotions, pay raises, and it was at this time that our first black department head was hired as well.

My concern for improving the infrastructure led to getting involved with the proposed one per cent sales tax which was placed on the ballot to be voted on for improving streets and roads and, most importantly, getting a new water treatment plant which would cost the city approximately 25 million dollars. Trahalimethane chemicals were discovered in the city's drinking water some time earlier. This was a cancer-causing agent that had plagued the drinking water for years, but it wasn't until the election year of 1985 that this issue became an apparent threat to our health and a political priority.

The first attempt to promote a sales tax failed drastically. However, our second attempt passed by a majority. With the passage of the sales tax, all the streets would eventually be paved within five (5) years. Twenty-one of the 26 miles of unpaved streets were paved during my tenure on council. My final contribution to my district, above all the other things not mentioned, was the curb and gutter paving project in the original section of the Lincoln Park subdivision. This was the neighborhood where I grew up. This was a long overdue project and it would be accomplished without assessing the property owners residing on Bunche and Bethune Street The project total cost an approximate $500,000. This project would be one of my proudest moments in working with the infrastructure projects.

Others would appreciate my contribution of working to place 13 black churches on the historic register, working toward having our first police substation

placed in the Hudson Dockett Community, and raising issues constantly concerning poor housing conditions. Old cars were removed from residences and unattended lots with high grass were mowed. In fact, it was decided that a junky city would not be tolerated any longer. This was a time when four years of dedicated hard work could not be ignored. A time when more citizens would be concerned for our community; a time when city hall would be concerned for our community; a time when city hall would listen to the citizens of Valdosta. This was a time when there was a greater concern for fellow citizens throughout the entire community.

Social functions were attended on a regular basis from the north side of town to the south side. These functions were attended by both black and white citizens alike. This was a time for all citizens to come together for the common good. Little did I know that this new experience would be short-lived.

10

Honors and Awards

I have never been the type of person who would do something for fanfare, or one to wait around for someone to congratulate me for a job well done. I guess you could say I didn't have time to even look back on the good deeds accomplished. I would assume that my tour of duty with the military conditioned me to possess this frame of mind. We were given a job to do and no matter how innovative or how enthusiastic you were about accomplishing a task, there were no incentives awarded for doing that job unless something was obvious enough to be awarded a medal or a ribbon. You were expected to do your job and do it well.

I received more honors during the period of time I served as city councilman than any other time in my life. Honors came from the Black Cultural league, Georgia Sheriff Boys Ranch, and a host of other community organizations. One honor I distinctly remember is the invitation to the White House—the inauguration day for the President. Being honored by the Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) organization meant a lot to me because this was my brainchild which blossomed into a widely utilized service for the Valdosta and Lowndes County community. These awards were gauges for me in determining how my self-esteem had increased during this time in my life.

At each point of recognition I would acknowledge God as the motivating force in my life. It was through my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that my moves were carefully calculated. Knowing that worldly recognition was not the focal point of my work in the community, I strongly believe that a reward will be rendered in a life after this one; however, I appreciated the thought that people from my community would

render praise and gratitude on a daily basis.

The name Willie Houseal practically became a household name. This proved to be a disadvantage to me at times because people would recognize me and I would not recognize them. This is the time when diplomacy is needed because most people automatically assume that you know them by name. So at times I would ask their names, and at times I would just play it off as though I knew them. Oftentimes, achieving local notoriety became a little inconvenient. The grocery store, the mall and even a walk in the neighborhood became a meeting place for citizens who wanted to voice their opinion or a complaint. During the early part of my term this experience would be a bit amusing, but after a couple of years, I began to look for ways to avoid confrontations. This inconvenience was often dealt with in a positive manner due to the position I was elected to serve. The Bible states, "**But He that is greatest among you shall be your servant**" (Matthew 23:11). I was well aware of this passage during my entire tenure as councilman of District 1. By 1989, many of the hard-core problems plaguing our community had been addressed and I began to feel it was time for me to move on. After all, spending five years in the public's eye without a single spot or blemish was quite enough for me at that time.

I began to consider my career as an educator seriously. As a certified teacher for the Lowndes County School System, I realized that certain educational maneuvers had to be made in order to better support my family and advance my professional status. I began attending night classes again at Valdosta State University. As I worked to further my education,

opportunities were afforded to me. A decision had to be made. Do I continue to serve the public at this juncture, or do I focus my attention on my career? Those final months of the year 1989 became a time when I looked to the future instead of concentrating on the past or the present.

INAUGURATION OF THE PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT

1989

In honor of
the President of the United States
and Mrs. Bush
and
the Vice President of the United States
and Mrs. Quayle
The Committee for
The American Bicentennial Presidential Inaugural
requests the honor of your company
at the
Inaugural Ball
Friday, the twentieth of January
one thousand nine hundred and eighty-nine
at eight o'clock in the evening
in the City of Washington

Black tie

11

A Time To Move On

The Bible speaks of times when certain things should be done, such as a time to live and a time to die; a time to laugh and a time to cry, etc. I have believed in this passage of scripture ever since I was able to comprehend the scriptures, and once again I felt the presence of the spirit as an inward sense of strength to leave the council after approximately five years of service. This decision was carefully thought through. It was my intention to make several moves at once.

I would be approaching a new political year, for the election was only two months away. Between contemplating career changes, purchasing a new home and selling the old one, timing was crucial, and decisions had to be made. The career move and the new home took precedence over running for another term. In fact, I chose to resign two months earlier than my term expired. Therefore, on November 7, 1989, I chose to step down, a moment in time I would never forget. There would be many memories to cherish for a lifetime. Politics would continue and problems would continue to exist, but I knew I would be remembered for the contributions I had made in my hometown during the 1980s. I would be able to show my children, grandchildren, relatives and friends the improvements made possible by serving on city council; not to mention the name, Willie Houseal engraved on large plaques at City Hall, at a new fire station on the north side of town and at the Water Treatment Plants in the city.

As I evaluated self-esteem at this stage in my life, I felt pretty good about my accomplishments. I share these feelings with young people every chance I get. This in itself was enhancing my self-confidence and

self-esteem. One place I would share these experiences with is at my school. I often use the scenario of possessing keys. If the young people I spoke with did not have more than one or two keys, I would show them that they really did not have any major responsibilities. It took keys to enter locked doors. The more keys one had in his/her possession, the more responsibilities or access to enter locked doors. In other words, keys could very well be the skills needed to take advantage of opportunities afforded to an individual thus increasing self-esteem.

Sharing would also take place in teaching my Sunday School class at the River Street Church of Christ. I shared with the students the story of the Good Samaritan and how doing things for others can make you feel good about what you do in many ways. By keeping in mind the scripture, Hebrews, Chapter 6, Verse 10 "**For God is not unrighteous to forget your good deeds toward others,**" I firmly believe in receiving rewards for the good deeds done in this life.

12

Going All The Way

I have now spent more time studying than any other endeavor during my entire life. Spending my first 12 years in the public school system was just the beginning. I had no idea that the time I invested in education would consume nearly 40% of my adult life. Knowing the importance of obtaining a degree, four years of college would hardly be enough. I had to go further. I earned a Masters degree in Human Resource Management at Pepperdine University prior to my discharge from the Air Force. I was able to work full-time as a certified teacher in the Georgia school system, and during that same time, I focused on add-on courses at Valdosta State University. Georgia certification required taking several graduate level courses in order to meet certification standards.

Upon receiving the T-5 Teaching Certificate, I was inspired by Pat to go ahead and get something on paper from the University. I took her advice and began to work toward the Masters degree in education. These credentials led to the career in which I am currently involved.

Going all the way means you must first go part of the way on your own, by means of preparing oneself for what's ahead. Part of the way also includes accepting new challenges which comes along with each new job assignment. My first challenge was to complete the school term of a deceased principal located in Morven, Georgia, where the principal had taken ill and passed on. With no prior knowledge of being a principal, I took the helm of a small elementary school for approximately three months. As I have told many of my associates, I didn't do the back stroke, but I didn't sink either. I learned quite a bit during those

three months, especially in the areas of supervision and administration.

During this time I completed a Masters degree in Education. Continuing my education and the career moves were simultaneously taking place. The next school year would be the primary reason for the career move as staff development coordinator/ teacher recruiter for the Brooks County School System. I would gain vast knowledge in teacher training and system functions.

My next challenge would be to combine my primary duties and responsibilities with being the principal of Walker Street Kindergarten. I've often told my associates that at times I thought I was being punished by God with this assignment. However, this experience proved to be even more valuable than I could have imagined during the early phase of my career with the Brooks County School System, for this experience deserved its own chapter. The following chapter will focus on "how not to" work with kindergarten students of today.

13

A Good Principal Would

Listening to the cries of many children who were leaving their parents—mostly mothers—for the first time was only one of the situations awaiting me at Walker Street School. Although these were 5 and 6 year olds, they each had to be respected as little people who had feelings and special needs as individuals. This is something I learned right away from little people such as James, Mike and Sharon. What was considered to be a part-time principal, turned out to be a full-time situation along with the staff development position I was holding down. Becoming acquainted with the new administrative position was a full-time job in itself. However, learning the ropes of a principal was equally challenging and stressful.

I would often glance at a poster which said, "The moment you learn all the rules, they go and change the game on you." This was so true. After a couple of years as staff development coordinator, I was feeling pretty good about myself as a professional in education. By this time I began to realize that this self-esteem thing was a lifelong process, that these valleys we go through are often times the lows which causes our self-esteem to decline. I soon found out that the faculty at Walker Street Kindergarten was good at what they did; however, they needed guidance.

James was my "runaway" student. There were several occasions when this student would have a tantrum, then all of a sudden, at top speed he would dash for home, reminding me of something I once did, but keep in mind that this was a 6 year old and his home was clear across town through traffic and all the other safety hazards. On one occasion I looked for James for over 30 minutes. I was driving throughout the city only to find him sitting on his front porch

crying because no one was at home. I tried to calm him down and take him back to school, but he would resist and cry louder. After several attempts to contact his mother, I convinced him to come back to school with me by offering him a soda. However, to this day, James still has his tantrums.

Sharon on the other hand, would give me my first lesson on how not to be a good principal. She was a bright little girl who had problems settling down in class. Her teacher would place her in timeout, but she would get bored and began peeling paint off the wall or anything else she could do to combat boredom. By that time the teacher had taken all she could stand, and this student was sent to the office to see me. Somehow she had received word that this would be a piece of cake. I asked her just what should we do about her misbehaving in class. She confidently responded as she looked at the candy jar on my desk and replied, "Well, Mr. Houseal, a good principal would give me a piece of that candy in that jar, then read a story from a storybook." At that time, I agreed and did just that. However, from this point on, I promised that I would never ask a child this question again. Shortly after the incident with Sharon, I would discover in one of my leadership classes to never ask for suggestions from students about the means and methods of administering discipline. Even though Sharon never returned to my office for the same discipline problems, I would make this and many more mistakes as I faced this new challenging position.

That year as principal at Walker Street Kindergarten went by like a whirlwind. The school was closed as a kindergarten at the end of the school year and I resumed my duties as staff development

coordinator. I maintained my office at Walker Street, and served as the building manager along with other central office duties. These duties allotted me time to meet the majority of the personnel assigned to the school system and many acquaintances were established. Little did I know that I would be moving on to other responsibilities. As the year ended, so did my job as building manager and staff development coordinator. I went into the summer months carrying a full load of classes at Valdosta State University. As usual, I said to myself, "This is it, Willie, no more classes."

14

Back In The Saddle

As I worked toward a Teacher's L-6 certificate and a Specialist degree in Education, it became the standard from which I would go into my new position. During the summer months, I would be called upon again to take on another new challenge as principal of North Brooks Elementary School, located just outside of Morven, Georgia, a small rural community known for its peaches and farm produce. This situation was the focal point of all my former training, life experiences and overall leadership aspirations. Still more changes were made concerning my current employment status. I had to perform the staff developer duties until a replacement could be hired. This dual role lasted for four months into the new school year.

By the time I was a full-time principal, many changes in education had taken place. At that time I began to feel I was able to relate to those who had much more experience in education than I. North Brooks Elementary became the focal point of accomplishments at this time in my life. Approaching my 42nd birthday, I was finally able to see just where I stood in life. I was now working toward a career anyone would be proud of and, in my opinion, an income to match.

It was at this site that I would have to prove to myself that this was really what I wanted to do in life. I wasn't getting any younger and I would have to evaluate my tolerance of children during this stage of my life. Giving it my all and all is what I set out to do. Getting to know the faculty and staff, students and their parents became a full time job. As my superintendent would say, "Administrators have no time clock;" I quickly understood what he meant. The responsibilities were enormous.

As I began to network within my profession, I realized that each situation is different, yet all the same. Students, faculty and staff are similar throughout. The differences are centered around personalities and climates. I attended conferences and heard the same stories concerning faculty, staff and students. Again, what some would consider an adversity, I considered an opportunity, a blessing and a vehicle to help as many children as possible under my care each day.

The first thing I would do is declare this effort to be first class. I made a promise that North Brooks Elementary would be recognized as a school of excellence during my tenure. I would spend the first year adjusting to the new environment and before I realized it, I was at the school for two years. During the second year as principal I realized that this was it, my moment of truth, the time when one looks at oneself in the mirror and asks the question, "Is this what I'm all about?" Is this the strategy in solidifying my career? What about my self-confidence? Am I willing to risk getting out of my comfort zone? The answer was an resounding yes.

This was once again the test of many tests in measuring self-esteem and self-confidence. Loyalty meant much more than just being faithful to a country, cause, or friend. Loyalty meant making the ultimate sacrifice for a country, cause, or friend, and, to me, loyalty was my aim. I can recall when my superintendent mentioned the word loyalty during my initial job interview. I understood what he meant then and I understand it now. It appears to me that in every stage of my life, I was able to recognize what loyalty meant. From the military experience, from boys ranch experience, from the experience I now deal with each

day as a principal, everything was, at last, in perspective: my home life, my spiritual life, and now my professional life.

The most difficult task was now at hand. Realizing now that there would be some ups and downs when striving to be successful. Once again, the confidence that others had in me was very important. The focus was not on myself any more, but had now shifted to my abilities. For it was now time for me to take into consideration the task ahead. Considering the many young children who are now feeling the same way about themselves as I once did. I could recognize the patterns; the lack of self-worth, low self-esteem, and the lack of desire to achieve.

Although I may have walked into a unique situation with faculty and staff, a sense of direction and goal orientation was needed. Creating a positive climate was necessary if changes were to take place. And from the onset I would have to set the standards high to attain the degree of excellence. After all, it has been my motto throughout my short life to strive for the highest goals; even if they are not achieved I will be better off where I stop than where I was in the beginning.

15

Doing What It Takes

I quickly became aware of my new assignment associated with this career, and if I was going to remain in that saddle, I would have to become more aware of the situations around me from day to day. One thing in particular was nature itself. This is the time when I would call up the spiritual guidance during the day-to-day experiences in order to better understand people and their actions. I would have to introduce a theory from which I would draw.

We often discuss where man's soul will go when it passes on to the other side, but there is very little discussion about where the soul came from. If we can agree that the soul is considered as matter, or a form of energy, and this energy or matter cannot be created nor destroyed, then we can accept the fact that the soul is just temporarily housed in our bodies. I now understand that I have to prepare my soul for this journey to get back to where I first began. I also realize that it was the natural part of me which presents itself as a challenge to work out my soul salvation.

Many would agree that life is a gift, but I grew up thinking that I didn't get the gift but the gift wrappings instead by being born black (the dark skinned type) and economically deprived. This in itself caused me to harbor a defiant nature. For this was the first sense of adversity early on in life. Trying to overcome these social ills cause much of the problems associated with low self-esteem. I felt that I really must have made God angry wherever my soul existed at one time. And as I began to realize my shortcomings, I was able to understand a little better what this salvation thing meant. I now understand why I have to tolerate the actions of others when they do the things they do. Perhaps they, too, must have made God

angry. Many times I would witness actions by faculty and staff which left me asking the question, Why are you doing this?

With stress levels rising daily, I had to develop strategies to keep my mind free from distractions. Observing nature was one way of doing just that. There were times when I would sit and observe the natural activities which constantly took place around me. There were times when I would observe gnats swarming around my back yard in small schools. Suddenly I would witness as dragonflies (as children, we called them "skitters" or mosquito hawks) swoop down among the swarming gnats and pick them off. Communication among insects must be very effective. I would imagine the lead dragonfly saying, "Hey guys, there is a great game over in the Houseal's yard. Let's buzz over and get our fill." I would see several dragonflies simultaneously invade the ranks of the gnats feeding continuously.

Another nature scene I observed was the birds nesting in and around my yard. On one occasion, the robin family released their young and my back yard was the place where they would test their young wings. It just so happen that two miniature Doberman Pinschers focused in on the baby robins' attempts to fly. As the baby birds appeared to be in distress, the dogs went after the birds. All of a sudden I heard a sound. There was Mr. and Mrs. mocking bird. They were the bandits of the bird community. They found pleasure in antagonizing the baby robins. The baby birds were in a vulnerable position because my yard was free of underbrush and trees. Now we have the dogs and rival birds on the scene. A couple of woodpeckers dropped by to make their presence

known. About the same time a couple of bluejays flew in and communicated to their clan. Ultimately there were chirps of all kinds in my yard. I am not sure of the fate of the little birds; however, witnessing this episode certainly took my mind off school standards, schedules and students at the school.

There are lessons to be learned by taking a moment to observe nature scenes. I learned in both instances mentioned that communication is necessary for nature's balance to take place. Human beings can learn valuable lessons from the lower forms of life just by observing.

One final scene I want to mention is that of the hawk, the cat, and the squirrel. It appeared that a hawk had captured a squirrel, and was in the process of cutting off the windpipe of the squirrel until death overcame it. Along came the cat stalking what would be an easy meal if the cat's card was played correctly. However, the hawk had other plans. I watched this scene for approximately 20 minutes. Many scenarios were played out in my head. Regardless of the outcome, this was a mental getaway from my reality.

I realized the importance of being able to mentally remove myself from stressful situations. I had to learn this early on. The importance of having an outside interest became a focal point in my life. Among the many interests I pursued, it took me several trips to the golf course to get past the embarrassing moments. Even in a situation like this, self-confidence became a factor in learning this game. Simply setting the little white ball on the tee and swinging at it may appear to be a simple task, but true golfers know better. Many times I asked myself why am I doing this? Where is the enjoyment? The thought surfaced once again

reminding me of the fact that how one feels about oneself is constant as long as we have air to breath. Well, I did learn to hit the ball well enough to continue my quest to break 79 on a golf score card.

Other interests such as work with Max, a prize-winning Rottweiler which I raised from a puppy, would take up much of my time to get him ready for the show ring from time to time. Although these experiences were time consuming, it wasn't very expensive on the local level. If one is very serious about showing dogs, the expense could become very costly and Max had other ideas; ultimately his ring career was short-lived, but not before he had won two first place ribbons, three best of breed ribbons, two second place ribbons, and finally a third and fourth place ribbon. This experience most definitely boosted self-esteem and confidence.

I walked away from this experience feeling good about my accomplishments, not to mention that I was able to make two local breeders very proud to see their product on display for breeders and owners alike to see. The local breeders saw their names printed in the American Kennel Club Registration Manuals for the first time.

In my attempt to seek further outside interests, I also tried to revive my desire to ride motorcycles again. I purchased two motorcycles over the course of five years, but I found little time to take the bikes out of the garage for a spin. I was also reminded by significant others that this was not such a good idea for me at this stage of my life.

With only 24 hours in a day, eight of them was spent on the job and six to eight of them was spent getting sleep. This left only eight hours to grow and

develop as an individual. This growth became quality growth in a mental and spiritual way. The scriptures were enlightening. I understood that the simple way of life sustains life in its finest way. It was now time to begin to reflect on the life I once thought was only pain rather than pleasure. After all, life carries with it the physical body, and the physical body reacts rather than acts. In order to get the oxygen the body needs to sustain life, the lungs must react to the possibility of collapsing, having sight as opposed to being blind and running into something, and so forth.

In fact, the experience associated with feeling good about oneself is very much related to how one reacts to life's ups and downs. The things that happen to people can easily serve as an indicator in itself. The task of overcoming physical adversities can be equally important. Growing up with a dislocated shoulder certainly presented its problems. Just to help you get my point, the dislocated shoulder eventually resulted in a minor deformity in my stature—the right should is slightly raised above the left. As I sprinted on the football field, one of my coaches made fun of me because the deformity gave the illusion of sprinting sideways. This was a direct attack on my self-esteem. Yet, I overcame it also.

16

Reflections

Much has been said about the ups and downs in my life. These ups and downs were associated with the times when my self-esteem or confidence was often shaken. Being able to relate to my deepest feelings, I was able to better understand the purpose of my visit on this time side of life. Many individuals wrestle with these questions most of their lives. Although the answer may not be totally clear, I can only tell the reader what has happened to me and perhaps to many others like me. I saw a little black boy who came into this world, naked, void of knowledge, frightened and vulnerable. This little boy was nurtured and loved by a loving family. He also witnessed the rug being snatched from underneath his feet, eventually leaving him devoid of the very things necessary for a meaningful life to take place. The words self-esteem and self-confidence emerged from the sea of information and remain with this little boy until the present day.

For a while he thought that this scenario was only about him. What mattered most was what he wanted and needed with little concern for others. He was able to pull from the experiences generated by his actions, mistakes and all, and was able to triumph over one adversity after another. And yes, I finally felt comfortable being that little black boy. I am thrilled and honored that anyone would take the time to read this book because if you are at this part of the book, something must have struck a nerve.

Looking back on this phase of my life, I am now able to better understand the meaning of life, and at this time I am better prepared to deal with all that remains. I must tell others about this glorious gift

of life. The Bible tells us to be thankful for this gift, cherish it and share it with others. It has taken a while to get to this point and now the assessment is at hand. When I meet people from the old neighborhood, they first share their appreciation for my getting involved in the community and working for the causes of the ordinary people. I have heard old stories that I had long forgotten. It's amazing how things turn out when you really believe in what you are involved in, whether it's believing in yourself, or others. True faith assures you that your desires have taken place instantly realizing that the element of time is not the real factor. You will witness miracles right before your very eyes.

My mission in life had taken me to the very point where I had become very critical of myself and most of these findings were not very positive. Now I see hundreds of little boys and girls daily and the picture is all too clear. These little boys and girls must face the same monsters of self-destruction I had to face, only more concentrated and more complex.

There are children who desperately need to know that they are somebody special and appreciated. Each child is unique, each has his or her own special needs. A great deal of my professional time is spent offering that special something by helping children discover that special something inside themselves, which makes him or her learn how to appreciate their adversities as well as assisting them in looking beyond the big "I." Without this insight, self-confidence as we know it begins to crumble. To experience gratitude is to experience victory. The importance of making a child's experience valuable teaches him/her how to find it within himself/herself to

achieve by overcoming adversities. Self-worth cannot be accurately measured by a formal test, or any one theoretical application. However, I have witnessed the efforts paying off from time to time. Some might say, yes he won but it wasn't all that pretty, while others may say, a victory is a victory any way you can get it. I know it's a victory because my loved ones tell me this by the respect I am given. I know it's a victory because when I see one of my students go out of his or her way to get my attention, whether it's at a grocery store or at the mall, it's a victory. When I see a more adequate political structure for minorities in my hometown, even though it may not be perfect, it's workable and I see the victory. When my offspring are out there fending for themselves; I see the victory. I also see the victory when many of my former teachers and I meet at different places, and an enthusiastic greeting is always in order. True winners want to see all children become winners.

One of the main things that separates the winners from the losers is attitude. The way you see yourself and what you do about it. It's about taking responsibility for your actions and accepting the consequences of your actions. If this concept becomes internalized, half the battle has been won.

Life is like a group of pieces which make up a puzzle. We take each piece of the puzzle and put it in its respective place in our lives. By carefully examining each piece, one gets to know its curves, lines and overall shape. It fits perfectly into its place. In our lives, we find that there are pieces we try to force into place but they just don't fit. The more you push, the more you damage the piece. I have seen some pretty rough pieces of puzzles.

Many times these rough pieces represent crushed esteems. A particular child's puzzle may never be completed, thus resulting in another misdirected child, another soul void of the necessities of life. Each day I get to prove and reprove that which I know to be true and try new things that work and, many times, do not work.

This mission is clear; for each child I'm afforded the opportunity to encourage, to help him or her overcome one adversity, I cross the finish line a winner. After all, is there any other way to go?

The urgency to complete this book doesn't strike me by surprise because it has only been four years since I began. It's only time. I'm convinced that this piece of the puzzle will fit perfectly into its place and in my life. The very thought of sharing my words with my family, friends and significant others all over is worth the time spent bringing it all together. I am truly convinced that if one child is helped regardless of whether he or she is black, white, red or yellow, I will have made a difference during my visit here on this time side of life.

Many have made a difference in my life by helping me in just the right way. Living with the idea that helping others builds character, and character comes from within. Feeling good about oneself is a very important part of the foundation that good human character is built upon. If but one soul should gain something from the experience of reading this book, then the effort would not have been in vain. Consider this, this book may well be the beginning of something new and exciting, or maybe an inspiration to some and simply hope to others. The faith I now have will carry this work forward.

May all who witness these words find peace, love and happiness in abundance in your lives as I do. For what was once recognized as self-esteem has now developed into faith. God loves you and he wants you to love yourself as well. For the most part, the journey continues.

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A Word About the Author

Willie Houseal was born and raised in the small southern town of Valdosta, Georgia. At an early age, Mr. Houseal joined the armed forces and served for ten years, including duty in Vietnam as a member of the 19th Tass Reconnaissance Team. Upon his discharge, Mr. Houseal chose education as his field of interest and attended several institutions, including Pepperdine University and Valdosta State University. He is presently a doctoral candidate at NOVA University. In addition to writing, Mr. Houseal enjoys sports, music, reading and nature, and is a dedicated Elder of the River Street Church of Christ in Valdosta, Georgia. He has three children: Willie Jr., Yorshia and Terry

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