

**What Others Are Saying About
Maxine “Max!nator” Fredericks and This Book**

“I thoroughly enjoyed Maxine’s story of overcoming challenges and learning to transform her life so she could become a positive role model to others. A grandma who embarks on a successful bodybuilding career is definitely someone with wisdom and life experience worth listening to. You’ll be better for this reading experience.”

— Tyler R. Tichelaar, PhD and Award-Winning
author of *Narrow Lives* and *The Best Place*

“In *Living Life to the Max*, Maxine Fredericks tells her inspiring story of not letting big or small things stand in the way of enjoying her life and making it one worth emulating. Maxine embodies the proof that we can all create our own destinies and leave behind us a meaningful legacy.”

— Patrick Snow, Publishing Coach and
International Best-Selling Author of *Creating Your
Own Destiny* and *The Affluent Entrepreneur*

“In this book, Maxine Fredericks shares her hard-earned truths about life, love, forgiveness, and the determination

that tomorrow will see us farther than today. Never one to stop achieving and pursuing, there is a reason why her nickname is Max!nator. We can all learn something from her that will make our lives richer.”

— Nicole Gabriel, Author of *Finding Your Inner Truth* and *Stepping Into Your Becoming*

“Maxine Fredericks teaches us that we all have stories within us worth telling that can help others. She also shows us how we can turn our lives into better stories, not ones of pain and failure but of success and joy. The simple tools she offers of perseverance and forgiveness and her strategies to succeed will make you believe, ‘If Maxine can do it, so can I!’ Don’t miss this chance to live your life to the max.”

— Susan Friedmann, CSP and Author of *Riches in Niches: How to Make it BIG in a small Market*

“It has been my privilege to watch Maxine transform her life and body. This book is more than a memoir; it is a testimony to God’s power to transform pain into progress. Living Life to the Max will make you laugh, cry, think, and encourage you to take nothing for granted and pursue the best life offers.”

— Melissa Fredericks, Author of *Mer: A Caribbean Underwater Adventure*

THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR YOUR STORY

LIVING LIFE TO THE

MAX

HOW I DO SO AND YOU CAN TOO

MAXINE "MAX!NATOR" FREDERICKS
WITH DANITA V. KNIGHT



LIVING LIFE TO THE MAX
How I Do So And You Can Too

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DEDICATION

To my husband Karl, a silent storm. An inside-the-box guy, he helped shape and shield me when I was far outside the box and determined to take all kinds of risks. He was so warmly patient with me when I was broken and didn't believe he really wouldn't hurt me. I kept waiting for the anger to rise and the drama to begin, but it never has. Thank you, Karl, for always being the voice of reason for me.

To Demetriss, the nurturer, my oldest daughter who taught me long ago about compassion just by watching how she cares so much for those who don't seem to have the courage to stand up for themselves. Demetriss was born a big girl; she always made her decisions and stood by them, even when they were not in her best interest. She taught me how to step back and see her through her eyes.

To Rickie, my action stepson, born to another mother, who taught me to love no matter the circumstance. When everyone around me said I wouldn't do it, I knew taking him into my heart was the right thing to do. He was the awakening of discernment in my heart, and I did not know it at the time.

To Cicero, my oldest biological son, who taught me to see the beauty in everyone through his action personality. My greatest lesson from him was, "Mom, I know I am okay." Those words made me reexamine myself and my self-

worth. To know you are okay when your world is crumbling around you is a strong statement of faith in yourself. I'm not sure where he got this kind of strength.

To Mba, my youngest son whom I had to leave behind at nine months old, he brings joy to the world. A *knowledge* personality, he feels it's his duty to fix everything from your broken door handle to your heart. His inquisitive nature was hard for me, but as we have progressed, I so appreciate him and how he forces us all to think about why we do what we do. He is funny, and I get a kick out of telling people about him—it really makes them laugh.

To Melissa, my last born, my strong knowledge and blueprint personality who has the mental and physical strength to persevere and hold us together with her determination to uphold truth and learn through others' mistakes. "Melicious," as I affectionally call her, still dances to her own music, and this I love about her.

To Monique, my daughter from another mother, who came into our life late. She is a true *nurturer*, always trying to fight for the cause. I thank her for sharing her "never met a stranger" openness and for helping me learn how to speak to her sensitivity. I hope I'm doing a good job—I try to practice humility daily.

And to Danita Knight, who was an angel out of nowhere God sent to bring this story to life when she said, "I want to know what this woman does." Danita, I do hope *Living Life*

to the Max will be a blessing to everyone who reads it and will help us all as we journey through this life practicing being our *best*!

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I couldn't have written this book without your support. I offer my sincere gratitude, appreciation, and love. I am who I am because of you.

To you, my reader, thank you for your support. I pray you will stay in touch with me and share your stories of losses, triumphs, faith, love, forgiveness, and how life has brought you over to the *max*!

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Red Canynon - Las Vegas, NV





Preface

“To survive, you must tell stories.”

— Umberto Eco

As a child, I always wanted to have so much so I could give to everyone. I would say to myself that if I had money, I would give it to everyone, and I would call off the names of people I knew whom I would give it to. But I never had a lot of money to give away. Only now do I realize I have been giving a form of currency away all my life. Every time someone says to me, “You are so sweet,” I realize I have given a little of God’s peace. Every time someone says, “I love your smile” or “You are always smiling,” I have provided a ray of sunshine in their life. I’ve come to know my most abundant currency is smiles, encouragement, love, patience, kindness, thankfulness, support, humility, waiting, trusting, and faithfulness.

My “bank account” is full; I just didn’t realize it. Recently, when I was faced with some very challenging financial issues, I decided to trust God completely. Not to worry but to pray fervently and trust completely in scripture. I never had any worries or fears. Everything worked out for my good and continues to do so. My storehouse is running over, and I don’t have enough room for all my love and compassion. I want to share it all with you because sharing is what I was put here to do.

Together we can love, encourage, and live life to the MAX!

There is no doubt in my mind we were all put here to serve each other. Sometimes, we get off track and become uncaring, unloving, selfish, mean, or just downright ugly people, me included, but reminders are all around us of our purpose and how we can help each other.

One of those reminders is a newborn baby. No matter their color, how they look, or who their parents are, we just can’t help but pass that bundle of joy and smile. Usually, babies are so irresistible we must go up and talk baby talk with them, even though we don’t know them or their parents.

What would our world look like if we valued each other the same way we value newborns? The universe and everything in it would flourish. We are so rich, and we each possess a spirit within that, if turned on, will drown us in kindness, love, and admiration. Oh, how I wish and pray we could

turn the faucet on in our families, at work, at play, and in our service to each other.

It's possible, and I want to spend the remainder of my life turning on the faucet of love, forgiveness, and faith to leave the world knowing my spirit is all the currency I have, and I give it to everyone I meet.





Introduction

“There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up.”

— John Holmes

I never planned to write a book. Although I have years’ worth of journals about my life and have written down scripture and words of encouragement from other people who have suffered way more than I have, I have always felt uncomfortable talking about myself and what I went through. I only started sharing my story with others when I realized that sharing it was helping others, and then it seemed I was sharing it more and more often. I would encourage someone to keep the faith and never give up on themselves. I’ve met a lot of people who just couldn’t see there was a way out. They were lost and hurt, and they thought they were the only ones suffering and hurting. Often when I told them my story, they ended up with an indescribable look on their faces.

Telling my story over and over, I realized I needed to share it more to encourage others to keep moving on, to keep having faith, and to keep forgiving. It's funny, but every time I tell my story, I remember things I have forgotten. Remembering them always brings to mind the scripture about God not only forgiving our sins, but wiping them from memory. Isaiah 43:25 says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." Hebrews 10:14-18 says: "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days,' declares the Lord: 'I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.'" Then God adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is no longer any offering for sin.

It became evident to me that people were interested in hearing my story. A woman at my gym, Danita Knight, walked up to me one day and told me how much she admired my "presence." She saw me a few times after that, met my family, and ultimately asked me if I had ever considered writing a book. I told her I had not, but I would think and pray about the opportunity. (It wasn't so much that I needed to think about writing the book; it was that so much of what I had gone through was now a blessing that I didn't feel the need to write about the past.)

Here is what Danita recalls saying to encourage me to write:

When I met you, Maxine, I just wanted to know what you did. I was like, “Now, this woman is doing something right, and I need to understand what it is.” I think that’s probably the big question you get asked every day. So that’s what I asked, “What are people coming up to you asking? What do you do?”

I know from the space I work in professionally, as a weight loss counselor, that people are trying to figure that out. They are trying to figure out how to navigate their relationships with food, drink, and activity every single day because they don’t know what to do. There are so many resources out there that try to guide people, but clearly, we aren’t hitting it yet; we aren’t giving people exactly what they need because then there would not be all these new resources coming out every day to try to help people figure it out.

My ministry is listening to God, and when God tells me about a project, which is how this came together, let me just stop! And this may sound completely crazy to you, but I was not scared, so I approached you and said, “We need to be thinking about a book,” and at that point, I didn’t have any other thought except how motivational you would be in sharing *how you got like that!*

A few weeks later, Danita brought up the book idea again and asked to schedule a time when we could meet to talk

about the concept. (I didn't know then that Danita had been called to bring this book to life. I had no idea she had shared her ministry with her husband, who told her to go for it.) We met, and as has always happened in my life, everything and everyone who was to be a part of this project were all connected. (We went about looking for the right people, and everyone who was recommended had a connection to someone else. My public relations agent at that time, Carlos Scott, was a close family friend of Danita. One of my spiritual advisers was diagnosed with cancer when we started, and because she wouldn't accept the diagnosis, the Holy Spirit met with her one night and operated on her, releasing what was causing her physical, mental, and emotional discomfort. For me, that was confirmation that God wanted her to live to help me through this process.

Another influence to write came when I heard Gene Griessman share excerpts from *Lincoln on Communication*. Before then, it never dawned on me the world might never know I existed. How would my grandchildren know anything about me or who I was? How could they describe their grandmother, and what could they learn if they never knew who I was, what I was about? For me, that was a defining moment. I thought, *Oh, no, we can't have that. They have got to know it all*. After all, my mom never wrote a book, but she shared so much about life because she was so open with me. I love her for that, and I know she

is proud of me now. I never miss her because I know she is always there. Even today, I dare not do or say some things because she would not be pleased. Writing this book allows me to make sure my grandchildren and future generations will remember me and not do anything I wouldn't do.

This book is a chronicle of my seventy-plus-year journey through life to abundant health. This book shares details about my life, including the many people who shared in shaping me and those who caused me tremendous pain, but in the end, I can truly say today that by faith and forgiving every person, I have been able to change how I meet the world and can live safe and secure in God's arms. In these pages, I have shared all the different stages of my life to encourage and support you as you move through your own journey.

I trust and pray you will use this manual to maximize your life. I hope you will find motivation, encouragement, and inspiration, and then reach your full potential by sharing what you learn with everyone. If each of us acts as a candle to light the way for the person next to us, we will all live life to the fullest.

Be Blessed,

Maxine Fredericks



Winner - Masters Professional Bodybuilding Card

PART I

My Story





CHAPTER 1

Learning from Childhood Pains and Passions

“When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.”

— Henry Ford



First Glasses

I can't even imagine what my mother went through bringing me into this world. When I asked her once why she named me Maxine, she said it was the name of the woman in the bed next to her. (I was

born in the Tampa Negro Hospital.) I thought that was odd. I briefly thought about who this woman was and what made Mom give me her name.

Much later, I realized just bringing me into the world was probably the hardest decision Mom ever made, and even later I realized she must have gone through a lot of pain and suffering because everything was against her.

Mom never told me her full story. My desire is for all of us to learn from our past so we can discard what does not serve us and be open about who we are—to share our stories to help us all heal.

I was a World War II baby. My stepfather (James Long) went to war and returned home to meet a child (me) who was not his biological daughter. I'm not sure why my stepdad accepted me or why he stayed with my mom. I had a brother, John, who is five years older than me. We called him "Bopete," though no one remembers how he got that nickname. He was my mom's son from her first marriage, so I guess my stepdad was already used to raising children that weren't his.

I've only met one other person who has a similar story to mine. My friend Obom told me his story a few years ago. He was wounded during the war in Iraq and came home to find his wife three months pregnant from another man. My blessing here was I got to see firsthand how a situation

like this could seem like one would have everything going against them. Obom's story is one of forgiving, which is one of the lessons I want to share in this book—how learning to forgive and have faith is living life to the max. I've asked Obom to share his full story later in this book.

Everyone suffers when things go against them. As a child, not knowing I was not my father's child until years later changed my young life in a very bad way. I had my setbacks as a result, but I will share how I overcame them.

FOLLOWING YOUR PASSIONS

Before I talk about how the circumstances of my birth hindered my life, I want to tell you what a great, joyful, and happy life I had as a child. I grew up in Tampa, Florida, in the West Tampa area. We lived in old barrack housing that had been turned into a neighborhood for Blacks adjacent to the Edgewood Playground across from Spruce Street. Today, that area has been gentrified and you would never know it was historically a predominately Black and Cuban neighborhood.

I was always curious, and this caused my mom a lot of anxiety. Growing up during segregation, I always wanted to know what was in the whites-only women's bathroom and why I couldn't drink out of the whites-only water fountains

at the five-and-dime stores J. J. Newberry's and F. W. Woolworth's in downtown Tampa when we went shopping. It was hard for my mom to contain me because I would run away from her and try to get in the restroom or drink from the fountain. Not many years later, on February 1, 1960, four black students would sit down at a segregated lunch counter at the Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. They were refused service, touching off six months of sit-ins and economic boycotts that became a landmark event in the civil rights movement.

During my happy, curious times, I launched my athletic career. I vividly remember dancing and dancing and dancing on weekends at my aunt's barbecue pit. There was a ten-cent jukebox in the small space. People would come in to order their barbecue and put dimes in the box to watch me dance. Their smiling faces made me want to dance even more. I've always loved an audience.

Then there was my playground life. I loved everything about the playground—jacks, jump rope, checkers, hopscotch, swinging, sliding, see-saw, and croquet. I played these games all day long and never tired. I lived, breathed, and thought about all the playground activities constantly.

Life for me happened on my neighborhood playground. I loved watching the boys play basketball. I really don't know what sparked the desire in me to play the game. All I can

remember is being five and falling in love with basketball. I never got a chance to play on the courts like I wanted because the big boys were always playing, and I was just a little girl, so they would send me away.

The basketball court was off limits on Sundays. If you were caught on the courts by our neighborhood cop, Manny, you were in big trouble. I really didn't know what that meant, but in my mind, I assumed you would go to jail. But it was the only time I could play basketball.

I loved the game so much I was willing to risk going on the court by myself on Sunday. No one else had the guts to go with me because everyone in my neighborhood was afraid of Manny, and I mean everyone—young, old, and anyone who breathed.

I would sneak off on Sundays with my basketball and go to the Edgewater Playground courts just around the corner from my house. You didn't have to cross the streets. It was a matter of going through the paths from our barracks housing that had been turned into rentals for negros. Back then, the polite terms were Negro and colored. I was in my glory because I could spend hours in the blazing hot Florida sun shooting baskets if I wanted to.

One Sunday, Manny was on his rounds and slowly passed by. He proceeded to park and get out of his car. I recognized him, and it was on for me. I knew if he caught

me, something bad would happen to me, and if my mom found out, something worse would happen to me.

Without any thought, I took off running back into my neighborhood through the paths with Manny in pursuit. When I got to my house, I didn't dare go inside for fear he would be at my front door. Instead, I hid under the house in the crawlspace and waited and waited and waited for him to go away. I could hear him searching and asking neighbors if they saw someone running through the neighborhood. I could see him from under the house looking frustrated for almost fifteen minutes as he wondered where I went. Finally, he gave up and left.

I stayed under the house for probably an hour to make sure everything was okay, and then I came out, went in the house, and told my brother Bopete what happened. He was a good brother because we never, ever told on each other when we did something bad. But he laughed and told all his friends that his sister outran Manny the Cop.

Thinking about outrunning Manny brought to mind another incident that happened twenty years later. It was unfortunately not so funny; it was embarrassing, but I will share it because everything in our life makes us who we are.

Because my first husband abused me, we broke up and got back together many times. We had three children, so I really wanted the marriage to work for the sake of raising

the children since I had experienced a lot of pain when my parents divorced, and I really loved him. So I took him back one final time, believing, or wanting to believe him when he swore that he'd never mistreat me again. Well, the promise didn't last long, and I finally decided to move out and start over on my own for the umpteenth time.

Everything was going fine until very late one night he decided to break into the apartment where the kids and I were staying. He started a physical fight and tore off all my clothes. I got away and ran out of the apartment, down three flights of stairs, and into the street stark naked. I was running for my life down the middle of Main Street, in West Tampa, Florida.

I was almost to the corner of Main Street and Willow Avenue when I saw a couple sitting on their porch. I ran onto the porch with my husband in full pursuit. The gentlemen on the porch happened to have a shotgun, and when my ex ran onto the porch to get me, the guy pulled the gun and told him he would shoot him if he came any closer.

My husband left, and the couple helped me safely get back to my apartment.

I had no idea then that running would be how I would stay focused later in life. Thinking about these experiences helped me understand how powerful inner strength is when we face obstacles.

“You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have.”

— Bob Marley

Outrunning Manny gave me the confidence to be athletic. Of course, I didn't even know what the word athletic meant at the time. Outrunning my ex-husband marked my transition from accepting bad behavior to knowing there is always a way out even when we can't see it or don't know how it will happen. You see, even though we have setbacks, we always have something to celebrate in other areas that will motivate us to push forward.

I am sure you can also push the playback button to remember the joys in your childhood. Living to the max is not just about the good times; it's about living through the challenges and determining that the good will outweigh the bad if we allow it to. I really like reading or hearing stories of people who share how their lives changed for the better such as 50 Cent and Oprah Winfrey.

Although growing up I loved my family and my life, my mom and stepdad were constantly fighting. Their loud arguments and fights frightened me so much I would hide in my bedroom, covering my ears with pillows to drown out the noise and hold back the fear I had that they would

hurt each other. It all ended one Saturday evening shortly after another heated argument. I watched as my dad walked past my mom. She was ironing his starched white shirts like she did every Saturday evening. When he walked by, she reached out and placed the hot iron on his arm, causing a bad burn. Soon after that, he moved out of the house.

A few weeks after he left, on a Saturday night, my mom tried to wake me up to get me out of the house. I don't remember that, only that she told me it later. All I remember is waking up later and going outside to look for my mom and brother. When I didn't find them, I climbed back into the house through a window because the front door was locked. As I was climbing into the window, I heard several loud noises, but I didn't know they were gunshots. When I got back in the house, my mom and brother were not there. I don't remember what happened next, but I must have gone back to sleep. I had no idea that the loud noises I heard were my stepdad shooting at the person he saw going through the window (me).

Later, my mom and brother came back for me and told me what had happened. This saddened me further because I really didn't know what was going on, and I felt like I was the cause of our problems.

My life was shattered when my mom and stepdad broke up. It was my first heartbreak. I didn't understand what was

going on. I didn't understand why we had to move, and I didn't understand why I no longer had a dad. I was so confused.

I loved my stepdad since he was the only dad I had known. He was always good to me. He worked as a truck driver for a furniture store, and I was so proud of him. I really loved the Sunday rides he took us on. I would get so excited I would babble and babble on and on during the rides. I babbled so much he finally gave me a "backseat driver's license." I thought it was the greatest thing I could ever have.

Not only was my stepdad an integral part of my life, but his parents also meant so much to me. I was never treated badly by them because I was not my stepfather's child. As a matter of fact, I was in the bed with Grandpa Ish when he passed away. Grandma Maude later moved to a smaller apartment in the projects, but I went to visit her every day, even after my mom and stepdad broke up. I didn't know the difference. I could walk out of my front door, walk across the street, and be at her back door in all of two minutes. It never occurred to me that since they were no longer together, our relationship would end, and it didn't. She never treated me differently. In later life, how she treated me was an aha moment that made me realize how the love of another has a ripple effect. We unconsciously pass on what was given to us.

When my mom and stepdad broke up, I was so confused that nothing made sense to me anymore. Before that, I was so full of questions. I thought I could do anything and be anything in the world. Then, suddenly, my world was turned around. I went around in a daze. This went on for eight years, from the time I was five until I was thirteen.

I hope I have inspired you to tell your story of tough times and how they awakened the spirit in you to live your life to the max.

“Tough times never last, but tough people do.”

— *Robert H. Schuller*

Exercise

What passions did you have as a child? List at least five of the passions that made your childhood unforgettable. Talk about how you still have the desire to go for those passions.





CHAPTER 2

Living in a Blur

“As far as I am concerned, the greatest suffering is to feel alone, unwanted, unloved. The greatest suffering is also having no one, forgetting what an intimate, truly human relationship is, not knowing what it means to be loved and not having a family or friends.”

— *Mother Teresa*

In the last chapter, I talked about starting off in life with the odds stacked against you or when everything seems to go wrong. In this chapter, we will look at how loneliness and confusion can numb your emotions. That is what happened to me during my tough teenage years living with my mom and brother after the divorce.

My parents' divorce changed everything about our lifestyle. I was only five years old when my mom, brother, and I moved to the housing projects. Our first apartment was a one-bedroom walk-up. Later, we moved to a two-bedroom apartment where my mom and I slept in one bedroom with twin beds and my brother had his own room. Every cent was accounted for. As much as I didn't like not having much, my mom was responsible, and she was determined we would never go on welfare.

I remember sitting on the front porch at the beginning of the month, watching the mail carrier put a welfare check in everyone's box but ours. This was one reason I was so determined never to live in project housing when I grew up. Don't get me wrong. Our neighborhood was great. We never locked our doors, everyone knew everyone, and every parent looked out for all the children. But I somehow knew there was a better life possible, and everything in me wanted that better life.

From age five to thirteen, everything was a blur to me. Nothing registered. I could not focus in school. I didn't understand what school was all about. I felt lost and hopeless. I was a girl without a complete family, and without a complete family, I felt there was no life.

If you experienced any kind of suffering in childhood—an illness, an ill loved one, being orphaned, absentee parents,

abuse, losing someone who truly changed your life—you know what it means to feel alone, unwanted, and unloved.

In every phase of our lives, we experience both good and bad emotions. How we mentally process our emotions and move forward determines whether we live life to the max. I am sure you, like me, experienced one or maybe more victories in childhood that motivated you to move beyond what you knew to experience more than what you could have imagined at the time. Somewhere deep inside, I was able to feed on the victories to move me forward, and hopefully, so have you. If you are still holding on to childhood hurt, I encourage you to allow yourself to remember and find that same motivation you had in the past during your hurtful moments to move forward. The truth is we've all had both good and bad times. It's what we do with these experiences that allows us to live life to the max. The best thing about life is that every single day, moment, and second, we can have a do over; we can start fresh if we choose to.

Although I felt a tremendous loss when my parents separated, I still had dreams—dreams of a better life and my biggest dream of playing basketball. I don't know what got into me that made me want to play basketball, but it was all I thought about. It never occurred to me that I was short. All I knew was I was going to be a great basketball player, I believed I had the best one-arm shot ever, and that

I could jump higher than anyone, no matter how tall they were.

In junior high school, I got a chance to play on our school's junior girls team. I practiced hard. I practiced by myself after the regular practice sessions were over. When the other girls complained about running laps or drills, I never complained. It did not matter to me because I never got tired of running, and at the end of the run, I knew I would get a chance to play ball. I can still feel how the sweat felt running down my arms, running down the back of my legs, and pouring down my face doing drill after drill. The figure eight drill practice was my favorite.

I loved jumping against tall girls. I could run, jump, and shoot all day. I loved it when our coaches, Ms. Williams and Ms. Howard, let the guys' coach, Big Jim Williams, come and coach and practice with us. I lived, ate, and dreamed basketball. I learned everything about the game and its history. I wanted to meet James Naismith. I wondered how he came up with the basketball concept. I wanted to be a James Naismith and create the girls' basketball game. I wrote out his autobiography over and over from the encyclopedia set at my aunt and uncle house.

This was all my own dream because my mom was totally against me playing basketball. She never once came to any of my games, and she sure wasn't going to and didn't buy me

sneakers to play. I'm not even sure where I got my first and only pair of high-top Converse sneakers, but I had a used pair. I remember washing and scrubbing those Converse until they practically fell apart.

I loved traveling on the school bus going to different cities around my hometown like Clearwater, Ocala, Altamont Springs, Lakeland, and St. Petersburg. The bus rides were so much fun, and so were the games. Playing on outdoor courts and winning games was the thrill of my life. I wanted to play basketball in senior high and I looked forward to playing in college, even though my grades were not that good in junior high.

My dream of playing senior high and college basketball ended in the ninth grade. In the early 1960s, we were told girls' basketball was being banned because it was too rigorous of a sport for girls.

Playing sports was not what my mom had in mind for me anyway. Her dream was for me to be a musician. She also wanted me to be a school guidance counselor when I graduated from college. A what? Where did she get that notion?

So, since I couldn't play basketball, I decided I was going to play the piano and be a famous singer. Well, I absolutely hated practicing what my piano music teacher taught. I really just wanted to play and make my own music, not do all

the boring stuff she was teaching, but I faithfully practiced every week. After all, my mom really worked hard, and giving up a \$1.50 for each lesson was a sacrifice for her. So I practiced enough to be decent at my sessions. I wanted to play the piano by ear, so that was what I concentrated on during most of my time practicing the piano. I would listen intently to music I wanted to play over and over, stopping the music and restarting it, and picking out the chords on the piano, learning to play what I heard. But I usually played the part as I felt it. Once I learned how to play the chords for “The Boogie Woogie,” I was on my way. Our piano wasn’t tuned, but I spent hours on end perfecting “The Boogie Woogie.”

I became interested in and friendly with the other musically inclined kids in my neighborhood. They were in band, so I wanted to be in the school band. I wasn’t sure what instrument I wanted to play, so I started off with the xylophone and trombone and ended up playing the baritone horn, which I was not great at, but it landed me a spot in the band.

Music became one of my passions, not because of my mom, but because it was another escape for me. I always wanted to do something different. The clarinet and flute just seemed like they were meant only for girls. I love the French horn to this day; it’s the one instrument I would love to play.

Anyway, I developed a love for all kinds of music because my band director, T. J. Simpson, was so diverse and we played everything. And we had an awesome marching band. To me, T. J. Simpson was the smartest man in the world. He spent almost all his waking hours with us. We were in the band room from seven in the morning to seven or eight at night. Of course, my mother never approved of that either. I was engaged but with no real support.

I don't mean to blame my mom. She was an incredibly hard worker, and she always had at least three jobs. Her eight-to-five job was at a large commercial laundry where she ironed linen table napkins used in restaurants for ten cents apiece. She would come home and get ready to go to work at a local restaurant in our neighborhood three or four nights a week, and on weekends, she worked at a transit hotel changing beds after customers spent a few hours there.

Mom wanted me to be aware of what was going on, so she always took me to work with her on weekends. As a matter of fact, my mom took me everywhere with her. She finished high school at night, and I went to night school with her. I learned to type in the seventh grade at night school. As a matter of fact, I was the fastest typist in the class full of adults. I guess that is kind of like kids today knowing more about the computer than their parents.

Even though school didn't interest me, from first through

ninth grade, some good things happened that helped shape me. My aunt Channie really loved me. I'll always remember the time I was sick and she walked for miles just to come see me. After we moved into the housing projects, and while I was in elementary school, I went to my aunt's house every day. She always gave me some cornbread she cooked in the skillet and a glass of milk. I loved dipping the hot cornbread in the milk. That was the most delightful treat I had ever had.

A few years later, when I was around twelve, Aunt Channie married my uncle John Scott, who was raising his two children, Betty Lou and Ned. I don't know what happened to their mother. But there I was with only a mom while my new cousins had a dad and now a new stepmother. It never dawned on me that my concern for my own pain didn't allow me to think about how they must have felt without their own mother.

Aunt Channie and Uncle John bought a home. I thought it was the greatest thing. I just loved going there. I liked it so much that I asked my aunt to let me clean their house just so I could stay with them on weekends and pretend I had a complete family.

I loved going to my aunt and uncle's house; that is where I fell in love with reading. I would finish my cleaning early so I could spend time reading all the books my uncle had.

My aunt's only book was her Avon order book. They also ordered a lot of magazines. I had never seen *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Reader's Digest* (the short stories by famous authors were my favorite), *National Geographic*, or even the Sears and JCPenney catalogs until I went to their home.

As you can see, despite not having a father in my life, I had some good experiences growing up.

Exercise

Let's stop here and look at some life lessons from good and bad experiences that propelled us forward or stumped us. What have you done in the past to live life to the max, despite any hardships?

50 Living Life to the Max

What could you do now to live life to the max?





CHAPTER 3

Daddy's Home

“Showing up in the lives of children is everything.”

— Greg Boyle

By the time I was thirteen, we were living peacefully in our two-bedroom project home at 1808 Willow Street in Tampa. Out of the clear blue one day, my mom showed up with a guy. I guess he and my mom had been talking, but he had never been to our house before. I thought she was going to get married, and I would have a father again. I was so happy. The man came around occasionally, until one day Mom and he said they had something to tell me. I thought they were going to tell me they were getting married.

Well, they were not going to get married because he was

already married. The news was that he was my father. I learned that day that my stepdad was not really my father. It kind of dawned on me then, but not with full effect, why my mom and stepdad had broken up. It took years for me to understand the full magnitude of what this all meant.

Only a few years ago, I realized what a strong and brave woman my mom was even to have kept me. I finally understood the guilt, hurt, and shame she had to bear through the years. I don't know to this day if my real dad was married to his current wife when Mom got pregnant.

By the way, I have a relationship with my stepmother today because my mom made sure she had a relationship with her. I had no idea then that both my mom and dad would die first while my stepmom would be self-sufficient into her nineties, just like I would love to be when I got to be her age. Over the years, I have learned so much from my relationship with her that has helped me become who I am.

Having a mother and father was the only thing I wanted in life as a child. I spent so much of my childhood at friends' houses to be around "normal" families with a mom and dad. I started drawing the picture of my dream house over and over during this time, and I always kept a drawing with me all the time. Even when my friends' parents were arguing, I was oblivious to it because I felt so lonely from not having what they had.

I wanted it so bad. I was lost, but my mom kept a tight rein on my brother and me. We were not allowed to do any of the things the other kids did. We had chores. We were not allowed to hang out or go to movies. (We called it “the picture show” back then.) We weren’t allowed to go to dances (although I did manage to sneak to a few; I just had to be back home before my mom got home from work). We went to Sunday school, church in the morning, ate lunch at church, went home, took a nap, and then went back to Baptist Training Union (BTU) and evening services. I sang in the choir. I was the junior church recorder, so I read the church messages during morning service, and I also played the piano for Sunday school.

Yup, I know every hymn in the Baptist hymnal. Of course, we always sang the same songs every Sunday. I even know all the hymns the deacons and mothers brought up in prayer service before church. My favorite was “A Charge to Keep I Have” as sung by Deacon Jones. He opened every Sunday morning prayer service with this song. I was able to find a version of the song on YouTube a very close rendition of how he sang it. You will love it. (<https://youtu.be/YmMBbIXsdoM> - lyrics by Charles Wesley)

Today, I remember most of the prayers and each deacon’s prayer. At home alone, I played church, mimicking all the deacons and the church mothers; I played the piano and sang all the songs. I guess this was my practice. Although

we always went to church, my mom kept her distance and stayed out of the gossip. We were never popular, staying on the fringes, even though we were always present.

Once there was a scandal about the pastor. Other women would tell the stories in hushed tones. My mom always used scandals as teaching moments about how to live. My mom was up front and shared everything I needed to know to stay clear of gossip, trouble, and getting caught up with the crowd. I knew everything I needed to know about sex, men, and what could get me in trouble.

Here is a funny story. One Sunday evening, my mom and I went to visit another church after our Sunday evening service. It was a common form of entertainment in those days for one church to have an after-service program and invite other church choirs, quartets, and solo artists to come sing on their program. Sometimes, these events would last way into the night. My biological father was somewhat of a player. He had a quartet called the Gospel Tornadoes. (He even had a Sunday morning television show back in the day; it was the only Black gospel quartet on air in Tampa.) Well, it so happened that my dad's quartet was singing on the program at the church that night along with other groups and choirs. I don't think my mom knew he was going to be there. When we got seated, she leaned over and said, "Don't look back, but your dad is sitting in the back with a lady." She was not his wife and neither of us knew

her. Just about that time, there was a loud crash behind us. My mom turned around, and because I was told not to look back, she turned back to me and said, "Don't laugh, but the pew your dad and the lady were sitting on just fell and they are on the floor." We laughed about that for weeks.

I was taught how to be a welcomed guest at anyone's home, not to hang out with the crowd, not to go shopping with other people, not to allow anyone to touch me, and to tell my mom if someone tried to touch me. I had so many rules and regulations in my head, but I was truly naïve to what was going on in the world. I learned this later, when my classmates talked about the things they had done in junior and senior high school.

*"Loneliness and the feeling of being
unwanted is the most terrible poverty."*

— Mother Teresa

Exercise

In which areas of your life have you felt lonely and unloved? It's never too late to rekindle relationships and turn those unloved feelings and that loneliness into loving relationships. Think about how it would feel to let go of old

