



My Black Grandmother Grew Up During WWII in West Virginia

By Kelly Touhey-Childress

The threat of an air raid was real for my grandmother's generation in this country. While the United States of America was deemed a super power in the world, the threat of danger still loomed for many. In the South, the threat was more severe for some than for others. Those who could take shelter would, and the more fortunate ones would have a chance at survival.

If you were white, you had a leg up on survival when the alarms sounded. Any shelter was open to you.

My grandmother tells the story during the lockdown of 2020 - when the world was frozen and unsure of what comes next. Prompted by the weight of current events like the murder of George Floyd and a global pandemic, she revisits her memory. She recounts an early time in her life when she felt helpless, hopeless, and less-than. She was making a point about how far we've come and how far we still have to go.

World War II started on 9/1/1939 and ended on 9/2/1945. My grandmother, Grace Swann, was born on 12/12/1934. She grew up in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. During her young years, she endured drills for air raids during the war. The people in town were instructed that whenever they heard the alarms, whether a drill or the real thing, they were to run and take shelter in the nearest buildings for safety and to be accounted for- unless you were Black, which my grandmother was.

On a particular day, Grace was walking down the street as she typically did to get to and from school, church, relatives' houses, and the store. The alarm sounded. In a flash of time, my grandmother went from a normal day to an emergency. At that very moment, milliseconds, what happened next for her was to panic. She took quick stock of her surroundings – her immediate environment was the 'white part of town.' As she searched her racing mind and the surroundings she saw houses, churches, and other establishments that were off limits to her for shelter.

In that moment, Grace decided to run. It was the fastest she'd ever run in her entire life. How long and how far she had to run for shelter she could not be sure. She said it felt like forever and many miles, until she reached buildings she could enter based on the color of her skin.

That day ... it was a drill or a false alarm. That day felt like the end of the world as she knew it. As a young child, not yet out of elementary school age, she felt not worthy of a safe place during a dangerous time; as if her life was not worth simple shelter.

Stories from my grandmother always move me. They move me in ways that you move when wearing an uncomfortable outfit or when you get sick to your stomach. The trauma and hardship her generation and those who came before her endured, they always give me pause and move me to reflect.

Fast forward to 2022, when she makes an annual trip to visit her only living sibling in that same town. My father, her son, and his wife bring the sisters out to lunch. There is a new restaurant in town that her sister wants to try. My grandmother was reluctant to go to this restaurant. The town had converted a whites-only schoolhouse into a modern restaurant; a building that the sisters had to walk past everyday to attend school in a tiny one-room Black schoolhouse.

White staff in the town waited on my grandmother and her sister inside the building where they were once not valued enough to be allowed to enter. This was the very first time that my grandmother had ever seen the inside walls of this building. As she sat at the table, this strange feeling overcame her. My grandmother did not feel proud of this experience. Instead the memories of lifetimes of injustices overcame her... and maybe, just maybe, a glimmer of hope for the generations to come.

When I asked her if I could share her story for this resource, she responded with shock and humbleness in her voice: "That Story? Of course. I have many more and so does your grandfather. In fact, he and his siblings had it worse than I did. He lost one of his brothers when they were kids."

We have come so far, and yet, we still have so much to do . . .

Stories like these are everywhere if we dare to uncover them from within our schools, communities, and our friends' and family members' hearts. They live close to us, and they live across the world.

How do we bring our hidden past into the light - these untold stories of injustice that shape and change us for generations? In order to move toward a more inclusive future, we share them and listen deeply.

You matter. The hidden stories of your ancestors matter. The stories of your neighbors matter. Healing begins at the source. The source of this deep-rooted pain lies within community and within the community it can be healed.