

From DOOMED to DOCTOR

*280 Chestnut Street*  
*Born in the Crack but Didn't Fall*  
*Through*

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## ***Dedication***

*This book is dedicated to my two brothers, Danny Lamar Gay and Kenneth Lee Gay, who perished right before my eyes from the effects of childhood abuse, and the silent mental illness of schizophrenia. Also to my sister Debbie Yvonne Gay whose whereabouts have been unknown to the family for many years for the same reasons.*

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## Preface

This book is a true story about my life that took a long time to write because it includes many dark times that I would rather not remember. Nonetheless, I felt my life story could give others the courage to conquer their life obstacles, no matter how it began. I was able to create a new life regardless of how bad things once were. It takes time to change, to regain and reclaim all that was lost as a result of childhood abuse, neglect and bullying.

It centered on my family of origin: four brothers, one sister, my mom and grandmother. Their names in chronological order from the oldest to the youngest: Danny, Kenneth, Billie Rank, Randy and Debbie and there is Mom Beulah and Grandma Mary. From birth to 18 things at home were brutal – my mother and five siblings were plagued with painful human flaws. I never knew what to expect on a daily basis. It was as if we were all trapped in the family tragedy. Through no choice of my own, I was subjected to daily suffering.

To escape it all I turned to movies, music and TV programs. Thus, in my story I will reference them often. They are considered “classics” now and R&B Old School music. Yet the themes are ageless. The themes of home,

faith, love, success, romance, validation, confirmation, friendship and life experiences never go out of style – they are simply expressed differently.

Each song, movie or TV series gave me a source of comfort and encouragement. Many times these things were an unflinching source of love and affection in a seemingly hopeless situation. To be exact they became my animated imaginary friends as I was too ashamed to tell anyone about my living circumstances for fear I would be blamed. The well-known documented fact of a child's mind that says, "It's gotta be my fault!!!"

I was 48 when I received my Doctorate of Education degree from Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. As I stood in line waiting for these established distinguished professors to call my name to receive my degree, indescribable joy and gratitude flooded my being. Upon hearing my name, I walked across the stage feeling God's love hugging me! A sweet feeling came over me and instructed me to now go out and tell the world that you can "Repair Your Life!"

The one thing that got my attention from age 18 to 26 was that I was repeating the same painful experiences even though I was no longer helpless at the mercy of mom Beulah and my five siblings. That is when I decided to work hard at life as well as study it. A poignant saying sums it up succinctly: "I can do nothing to change the past except stop repeating it in the present!"

I took tiny actions each day that proved to me to be more effective than weeks and months of immobility followed by forceful attempts to change quickly. My process was simple not easy: own up, admit my faults, make up, forgive myself and others continually, keep up, continue to learn about myself, religion, God( The Source Of Creation) and help others.

Spirituality was the rock upon which I built my second life presented in this book. I hope it empowers you as it did me!

## **Part One:**

### **Early Life**

*“We are born into human laboratories called ‘families.’ What happened to us is our beginning, under the roof we call home, will affect us for the rest of our lives. No matter how far we travel, how fast we run, we carry home with us wherever we go. Many times we leave home carrying heavy suitcases packed with misconceptions, anger and with feelings we should have expressed.”*

*Patrice Gains, “Moments of Grace”*



## **EARLY LIFE**

I was a dead woman walking at the age of 27. My life had been one piercing disaster after another. My day to day living was churning, swirling out of control, a real “hot mess,” and I was clueless as to why. It felt somewhat like a 9/11 morning catastrophe, one horror after another: except my attackers were from my own insides and I was powerless to stop the daily fires that left me scarred with emotional and mental blisters. It felt like I was riding on a merciless merry-go-round, at the whim of Hurricane Katrina winds, and drowning in a sea of self-made flood waters. I began to see them as emotional disasters.

Luckily, being naturally somewhat intelligent, I began a quest to connect the dots. It was crystal clear at this point that I was doomed to hell on earth if I didn't do something drastic, so I chose the road less traveled for many years: the road of facing myself and all of my demons, owning my part of this haunting nightmare, and setting out to reconstruct my life. It turned out to be a tremendous endeavor. I needed a new Bonita, one who could make constructive decisions instead of destructive ones. Life is merely a series of choices and reactions. Good ones, which can heal us; bad ones, which can hurt us; or indifferent ones which won't have much of an effect.

My journey is too horrific for most people to comprehend, and it began on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1956. It is ironic that I was born on a day considered to be lucky. Yes, sometimes it did feel like God was teasing me, because luck was exactly what it took to drive my humble beginnings toward a new, uncharted path. I like to think of it as God luck...the miraculous! I would need luck...light-years of it to overcome the pathology of the generational dysfunction in my family.

## **Hot Stuff: In the Name of Family**

My early years were filled with chaos; I endured a bitter loneliness. I recall waking up one morning to a burning house, full of smoke. I was shaken awake by my oldest brother, to a blazing hot feeling, and I began to cry uncontrollably. In my young mind, I was thinking, "Why? How? Who? What? When? Who would want to burn our house down, and with all seven of us in it?"

It happened in the dead of night; all seven of us scrambled to get outside. Smoke and heat were everywhere, but we managed to make it out safely. We had escaped what turned out to be a premeditated murder attempt. I was four years old, and I have some memories of the event. My mom and brother retold the story on several occasions as did aunts, uncles, and first cousins. Here is an account of the events.

Our last stay in the Eagan Home Projects ended with an eviction, and our rent-a-house cycle went full-blown. In between evictions, babies kept coming, and long stays at Grandma's house began. This went on for 10 agonizing years. On many occasions, our dad left us without food and homeless, and finally, my mother, Beulah, had enough. She separated from my dad even though this was unheard of in the 1960s and frowned upon by her mother, Mary, Grandma Mary to me!

My mom had finally left dad for good, and he was furious. Our father, Willie Frank Gay Sr., was known to not work, get drunk, and gamble, Dad was too self-absorbed to realize he couldn't keep his wife and his six children that way. It finally set in when he realized mom Beulah was serious about leaving him. So he decided the best solution was to wait until we were all at home, tucked into our beds, fast asleep, then he poured gasoline on the house, hoping to kill all seven of us. Of course, he had to get really stupid drunk to do this, and that's exactly what he did. We were swiftly taken to Grandma Mary's house.

Mom Beulah had finally stood up to him. She went to the police station and took out a warrant. Mom Beulah told them who did it, and why he did it. Dad was arrested, but later released because she didn't have any witnesses. However, there was a traveling rumor throughout Dad's side of the family that he'd said, "Yes, I tried to burn those suckers up!"

This time, our stay at Grandma Mary's house was short lived because Grandmother and Mom didn't get along. They had an atrocious relationship. The shouting matches between them frightened me, my brothers and my sister. A soothing day finally came, Mom Beulah found a house for us. I inhaled and exhaled with excitement as we moved to our new home. Glory, glory—the evictions came to a permanent halt, and the moving from house to house faded into the sunset as quickly as it came. At last it was 284 Chestnut Street!

Then, a new form of insanity settled among my living arrangements: all of a sudden, I was tossed in the salad with six family members: Danny, Kenneth, Randy, Billie Rank, mother Beulah, and my sister, Princess to Queen Debbie. Early on, I always felt like an outsider—a misfit.

My dad had always kept my brothers in line. With his presence, they didn't dare harass me but he was gone. Mom Beulah was absent a lot too as she worked and went to school to become a hairstylist; eventually, owning her own hair salon.

At first, I was so happy to be at 284 Chestnut Street in this two-room house with one kitchen, and one front room, as we called it in those days. According to my oldest brother, we had lived in many places before settling down on Chestnut Street. These places were always in “the hood,” low-income neighborhoods, except that in the 1950s and 1960s it wasn't called “the hood.” It seemed as if many

African Americans lived in broken down shacks or one of the housing projects. We had our share of both. The Eagan Home Government Projects was luxury living in the eyes of my oldest brother, Danny. I was too young to remember or to know the difference. It was only decades later, he realized that living in the projects was actually a poverty-stricken state of living and not the penthouse suite his childhood mind once envisioned.

We liked our new house! The males had a room in the kitchen and the females had the other room, and better than that, one day out of the blue, mother Beulah brought home a television set.

I had a close relationship with that television set. It was my only means of escape, except for the large quantities of food. I was so mesmerized by the morals in the shows and I especially liked the romance scenes when the boy finally kisses the girl. Suddenly, I knew how I wanted my life to be. It would be like the TV shows, with a happy ending—*It's a Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart type of life! “Teacher says, Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.”

Whoops, unexpected blow. I am being screamed at by mom Beulah. “I’m going to leave all six of you kids. I’m sick of you all!” Kazzaam: Mom is making those cutting remarks again. “Get your damn ass in here and sweep this kitchen.” Thoughts race through my head. What? What? Where the hell am I? This certainly doesn’t match the TV shows, *Dick Van Dyke*, or *Captain Kangaroo*. It’s a

million-man march away from the *Popeye Club* and the *Lone Ranger*. No one acted like this on the *Lassie* show. I embraced TV, and it was my world. It gave me a path to disconnect from the madness of my first family.

I felt like things were going pretty doggone well (the TV, no drunk Dad), until we moved three houses over to 280 Chestnut Street. This new house had three rooms instead of two. Almost immediately, I developed anxiety from the move and had a miserable time adjusting. I couldn't give it a name at the time, but today, it is clear to me. You see, my only means of comfort had vanished. The one television that we had was now moved to my brothers' room. Never again did I have access to the TV. All my favorite shows faded into a memory—like a vapor—and so did I, heartbroken.

My brothers took it away from me like prisoners are taken away and locked in a cell. I knew where the TV was but they prevented me from getting to it. The TV we had was being controlled by my abusers. The one thing that kept me company was gone. I held all these feelings inside, as I had long since stopped talking to mother Beulah. All she did was scream, yell, fuss, and beat your ass with an electrical extension cord over the slightest flaw. I was fragile, and Grandma Mary wasn't much help because she had little to no influence over her daughter, mother Beulah. Left with no one to tell, I descended into a bottomless pit of the damned, which was a breeding ground for assorted addictions. I ate just about everything I could find—and it began to show on my young body.

With my TV crutch gone, the horror of it all seemed too commonplace at 280 Chestnut Street. My house was the last of three houses in an alley. In those days, there were still unpaved sidewalks in Atlanta. It felt like a dark cave. However, the welfare food of yellow grits, canned spam, canned beef, powdered eggs, dry beans, white rice, powdered milk, white flour, and yellow cornmeal was an welcoming sight. In addition, hors d'oeuvres to us was store-bought white bread, hot dogs, red hot links, pork and beans, and sweet Kool-Aid. It made me smile when we finally had something different to eat.

Many days our meal was a pot of beans and a pan of cornbread. Another entrée was cornbread and buttermilk. Again, I'd smile for this dish, as did my five siblings but I ate large quantities of these foods---any foods! Strangely, Mom would never eat with us. She had her meals elsewhere, and then she retired to her locked (no children allowed) room. Well, except for my youngest sister, Queen Debbie. Debbie could stay in Mom's room 24/7, without any harsh words or harmful side effects. She and Mom had an emotionally unhealthy relationship, which possibly could have influenced her in her later years to date both men and women. I ain't mad at yah! Do *YOU!!!*