

MRS. GEORGIA W. ALLEN



Beaumont, Texas

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I was born May 12, 1919, in Beaumont, Texas, and my given name at birth was Georgia Mae Williams. I hate the name. I just really do. Kids made fun of it, you know, and when you're a kid, the fun making doesn't appeal to you. So, that's why I decided that I would never make fun of people about anything because I know how much that hurts. "Mae" is a name that African-American people use a lot. My mother's name was Lillie Mae, but she changed it to Lillian and I don't blame her. I never had any nicknames that anybody told me about. There might have been some interesting names people had for me behind my back, but I didn't know about a nickname.

My great-grandmother on my mother's side (my grandfather's mother) was a slave who had a son by the master. We never knew what happened to her, and I can't call the man she had a child by my great-grandfather. I would assume that when my grandfather came out of diapers, they sold my great-grandmother and so I know little about her. I don't even know how many masters she had. I do know that her child, my grandfather, looked exactly like the master, and I think that is why he wasn't sold. When the master moved from Mississippi to Texas, he took my grandfather with him. That would have been in the late nineteen hundreds. Eventually, the master helped my grandfather buy a farm because they were afraid he would start dating White girls as the master's other two boys were doing. The boys had the same father, but different mothers. So, my grandfather was established on this farm, and he was doing very well independently. He looked around for somebody to marry. On the next farm from him, a man called "Uncle Dice Jackson" lived with his family, and he had sons and daughters. My grandfather married one of the girls, and they had nine children, of whom my mother was the youngest. The children were from very light to not looking white to very dark. My mother married a man who was dark brown, and that's how I got my color. Her name was Lillie Mae Burkley before she married my father. His name was Jeffrey Williams.

My maternal grandmother died when my mother was a baby, and her sister, Aunt Anna, just loved her. She and Uncle Wesley had their own children, but they loved my mother. They bought a farm down the road from where Grandpa lived, and that's where my mother spent a lot of time. When she was a baby, Grandpa would put one of the boys on a horse to ride him down the road with my mother to Aunt Anna's house, and my mother would stay there for weeks or

months and longer. When the crops were in, one of the boys would go to Aunt Anna's house to bring my mother home. But one time, Aunt Anna just would not let my mother go. She just cried and cried. So Grandpa got on the horse himself and rode down the road to Aunt Anna and Uncle Wesley's farm to get my mother. Aunt Anna cried, "I just can't let her go," and Grandpa said, "You gonna have to let her go. I'm gonna let you keep her a few more days and you get her little things together and you send her." A few days later, he sent one of the boys on a horse down to Aunt Anna's to bring my mother home. There was great love among all of them. Anna was the one who had fourteen children. You think that's much? One of her daughters, Mattie, had fifteen! I remember when I was out there visiting one time, I said, "Matt, what were you doing? Trying to outdo your mother?" She laughed and said, "No, I wasn't really trying to outdo Mama. It just happened that way!" Mattie's husband had died, but, fortunately, they had built a house on Aunt Anna's farm. So, Aunt Anna and her daughter Mattie and her family had all those thirty children there on the farm!

I have been to Grandpa's farm several times. One year, I went there with my husband. I took my daughter there when she was a baby. That was the summer my husband went to work on a tobacco farm in Connecticut. My cousin "Buddy" picked me up at the train station and took me out to the country, but I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand it. It was too quiet, it was too lonely, and it was too dark! Grandpa was long since dead, but Uncle Ulysses—we called him "Uncle Lish" --was living there and Aunt Cynthia was living there, too. One day, I said, "Buddy, what is it that you're doing at the factory?" That was the mattress factory. He said, "Bailing mattresses." And I said, "Could I do it?" He said, "You?." And I said, "Yeah. Can women do it?" He said, "Yeah, women do a lot of it. You really wanna do it?" And I said, "Yeah, I need to make some money. I spent all the money that I brought with me, and I'm getting bored around here all day." So, I want you to know he got me a job. That was in 1943. Some of the women thought that I was Buddy's girlfriend, but he was my cousin. How could he be my boyfriend? They didn't quite believe what he had told them, and they couldn't believe I was a teacher. "No teacher gonna be out here working on bailing mattresses in a factory. She a lie, honey. She a lie!" I just let it alone because I didn't care how I made the money as long as it was honest, you know?

Maybe I need to just start at the very beginning. The three of us - my mother, my father,

and I - were all born in Texas. I was born in Beaumont, which is on the Gulf of Mexico. My mother was a maid and one of the best. Back then, my mother had to be a maid because she could not get an education. My grandfather, realizing that was all she could do, sent her to the Capitol to a school called "Eliza Dee Industrial Home for Young Ladies," where girls were taught to be good servants. My mother was an excellent maid, and she was a fabulous cook. She was absolutely great at what she did. She was given to understand, like Grandpa back home, that whatever you do to make a living, you should be proud of. You do it well, and she did. As old folks say, "She wouldn't take tea for the fever."

I can't remember where my father was born, and I don't have any idea who taught him cabinetry, but I know that before I was born, he was a cabinet maker. The man he worked for knew how good he was, and so he would send my father to different places, and my daddy would go happily. The man knew if he sent him to West Hell, my daddy would go. My mother was alone with me, as a baby, a lot because my father was gone a lot. He was in and out. We moved to his mother's house in Fort Worth, and he was still on the go. Going, going, going. He couldn't work today and come home at night because he was maybe in another state. So, my mother was home alone with me in the swamp, and she would say, "I'm tired of sweeping the snakes away from the door in the morning! I'm tired of doing this!" So, my mother decided to travel with him. We moved from Beaumont to Fort Worth, where my grandmother lived. To make the story short, we lived in eight cities in four years. I can't quite remember them in sequence, but I know they were Fort Worth, El Paso, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, St. Paul, Milwaukee. That's only six. I've left out two, but Milwaukee was the last. All the neighbors wherever we lived said what a loving trio we were. "What wonderful people."

We left my daddy once and went home to Texas to Grandpa's farm. My daddy knew where we were. So, he came and found us. And of course, we fell on each other's necks because we just all adored one another, and we went back on the road. My mom would say, "Jeff, we've got to stop. Jeff, we've got to stop." She realized that we were moving further and further north and I needed to go to school soon. Finally, Mom made a serious move. She put me in St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Boarding School in Milwaukee, and she got a job as a live-in maid. My father came looking for us. Bless his heart. Every time I think of his coming looking for us, I just feel like crying. I can imagine how the poor man felt when he came home

and found us gone and there were strangers living where we had been living. We sold and bought, sold and bought, bought and sold furniture so much that my mother didn't have any problem at all moving. We'd sell it and just leave.

I was in the boarding school for a month or two while she searched the map for a place where he would not come looking for us because she knew what would happen if he found us. We would get back together again. We adored him, and he adored us. She found Cleveland on the map and didn't know a soul there. So, he wouldn't come looking for us there. He would only go to some place where he thought we would go, and he didn't have the slightest notion that we would ever go to this big old place. We boarded a train for Cleveland and arrived in the city about midnight with a couple of trunks and some luggage and no idea of where to go. I was a little whiney kid, hanging on, you know, moaning and groaning. My mother asked some people where she could find a nice hotel, and we ended up in one of the worst slums in Cleveland. She asked the wrong people, but it was midnight and we had to settle down there. I was six at the time.

Eventually, my mother got a room with a family named the Turners. They were what was called "sanctified and holy." They wanted me to join their church, but my mother said, "She needs to go to St. James," which was the Methodist church not too far from our house. We lived with the Turners for about four years. While I was there, my mother's father died in Texas. My mother went back to where he had been, but he was gone when she got there. We didn't hear from my father for a while. When I was nine years old, I got a letter from him, and I was delighted to get it. He found out where we were from his sister. I asked my mother if I could write him back, and she said, "Yes, if you want to. He's your daddy and you love him and he loves you. Answer the letter if you want to." I was up late answering the letter and Mrs. Turner came through and she said, "Oh my Lord, child. It's ten o'clock. You should have been in bed. You can do your homework tomorrow." And I said, "It's not my homework." She asked, "What is it?" I said, "I'm writing a letter to my daddy." And she said, "I wouldn't answer it if I were you. He's a bad man. You and your mother never hear from him. He doesn't help your mother out and she's working so hard." I believed her, and I didn't send the letter. I wanted to write to my father. I was trying to find him so that I could get him and my mother back together. I wrote to my mother's niece Maxine in Texas, my aunt's daughter, and

“Max” wrote back and said, “I’m not sure where your father is, but his sister Maude can tell you. She’s in Ft. Worth.” She gave me her address. I sent a letter to my Aunt Maude, and she sent one back. That’s when I learned that my father had fallen off a scaffold and broken his neck. He was dead when they got him to the hospital. When we got the news, my mother, stoic that she was, never broke down with me, but I know she cried. I think we both cried. I’m pretty sure she cried when I wasn’t around. This meant that she really had to do it alone. She was willing to do it, but she was now forced to do it alone.

My mother was about as bold a critter as I ever knew in my whole life. When I was twelve, she was dating, and the men would come to the house because she didn’t want to leave me alone at night. For a while, she was engaged to one man, and then he didn’t come around anymore. I heard one of the ladies in the neighborhood having a conversation with my mother. They called each other by their last names. She said, “Williams, we don’t ever see Mr. So and So. What’s wrong? I thought you and he were gonna get married.” My mother said, “I told him to get his hat and coat and go and don’t come back. I didn’t like the way he looked at my young’un, and I didn’t wanna have to kill him.” One day, I came home from school, and she was home early. I think I was about sixteen or seventeen at the time, and we were still living in Cleveland. You know how men can stand around (women, too) in groups, three or four people just laughing and talking together? Well, some men were standing out there, out front. My mother came into the house and she called, “Hey, baby.” And I said, “Hey, mom!” I didn’t hear anything more from her, so I went on with what I was doing. And then I heard her voice raised: “I hear there’s a man around here who’s been saying what he’s gonna do with my kid when he gets his hands on her, and he better pray to God he never gets his hands on her because I’ll kill him! I’ll kill anybody that messes with my child!” She finished and she came on inside, and I said, “Mom! Why did you do that?” She said, “Because I meant it. Do you understand that you do not have to tolerate anybody messing with you because I will hurt them.” My mother was my guardian angel. My daddy would have been, but he wasn’t there. I have understood her since I am now older and have children of my own and my grandchildren, too. I have the same philosophy as my mother. If anybody bothers my kids, I’ll kill them. I’ll put a hurt on them!

I have two children, and I sent them one summer to visit my mom. She always wanted to own a house, and after the last trip we made to Texas, I asked her, you know, what part of

town she wanted to buy the house in. I told her we were going to visit her the next summer and help her find a house to buy. We were going to hire somebody to do some work on the house, and we would do some work. We returned home to Atlanta, and I bought some dishes that I knew she would love. Beautiful china service for twelve. Silver to go with the china. Stemware. And a few other things. I never got a chance to give my mother what I had bought her because she had a stroke and was home alone for a whole week before she called my cousins. They asked her, "Aunt Lil, why didn't you call us when this happened?" My mother said, "I thought I was gonna get better, and I knew you were gonna call Atlanta and that gal would come flying out here, leave those children, take them out of school." She was looking out for my children. My mother died in 1955, two Saturdays before Easter.

I used to roll around on the ground with boys. I used to fight with boys. I climbed trees with the boys. I built tree houses with the boys. I raced with them. I wrestled with them. Every now and then, I'd get in a real fight with a boy and some neighbor would say, "Don't you dare hit that girl!" Boys would run along and pat me on the bottom, and I'd turn around and whop! I often did not have a regular boyfriend because of my mother's teaching: "Don't do this, don't do that."

When it was time for me to go to college, I couldn't get my mind made up as to whether I should go to Western Reserve in Cleveland. My mother kept saying, "You need to go South because you're a southern-born child, but you have never lived in the South. You don't know anything about the South. All you hear is what other people have to say. You need to go and see for yourself." "Uncle Buck," my mother's brother, had come to Atlanta to attend Gammon Theological Seminary. Gammon and Clark adjoined, and the only divider was Magnolia Walk, a curved, winding driveway lined with magnolia trees. I chose Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia. It was a bit of a surprise to my mother, but I had friends here in Atlanta, at Morehouse, at Spelman, at Clark, at Morris Brown, and I decided that I would come to Atlanta because I knew someone in school here. Interestingly, I did not know at the time that the fates had determined this was the best place for me.

I started at Clark in 1939 in the second semester, and I was put on probation shortly after the school year had begun. I met two young women who had been attending Clark. They were freshmen. I was a latecomer. I made friends with them. I did not know their history, and I

wasn't trying to find out. I had made friends. One day, when we were supposed to be at vespers, we went to the AU Center to visit a Clark student who lived across the street from Morehouse. She wasn't at home, so, without entering, we turned to the leave. As luck would have it, a Clark faculty member spotted us. She did her duty; she turned us in. All three of us were sent to the academic council, which was an inquisition. The other two girls were suspended and sent home. I was put on probation because my mother was a maid and the council knew how she would feel if her daughter were suspended. I couldn't have visitors, and I couldn't leave campus. The only thing I could do was go to class and go to the library.

I was about eighteen or nineteen when I met my husband. Thaddius Allen. He was seven years older than I, and I thought he was pretty old. I met him when I was given a part in a play, and he was this six foot tall, good-looking guy I was playing opposite. We were engaged after one semester. When I told my mother, she nearly had a fit. She said, "I thought you said you were not gonna get married! I thought you said you hated the boys!" I told my mother that Thad was different. I said, "He's a nice guy, Mom. I like him because he makes me feel like I don't have to fight." She didn't say another word. She got up and walked out of the room, and when she came back in, she started on a different subject altogether. We were married when I had one full school year left to get my degree.

Sometime during that year, my mother's neighbors called me and told me that my mother was very ill. This was in November in 1941. I had married in June of that year. My mother was living in Cleveland and, of course, I went to see her immediately. When I opened her bedroom door, four women were seated facing the door, and my mother's head was turned toward them. When I opened the door, all these heads turned. My mother saw those heads turning, and she looked to see what was going on. She stretched out her arms, and we started our hugging, kissing, crying, and carrying on. Two of the women were waiting to see how pregnant I was. They thought that if I had to get married in June, then I was probably showing in November. I kept my coat on in order to tantalize them. I was wearing a slim knit dress, and I twirled round and round, flattening my dress out across my tummy. I could see the disappointment on their faces. They would have been happy if they had known I was pregnant, and I was. My baby girl, Judi, was born in August of 1942. I stayed with my mother for a week, and during that time she asked me a lot of questions. One of them was if my husband had

ever hit me. I said, "Mom, you know if he had ever hit me, I would have broken a chair or something over him when he was asleep, and then I would have been back here!" I learned from her not to take crap from any man. Let a man hit you? No! My husband and I have been married for sixty-three years. Sixty three! We married on June 4, 1941, and we have two children: a daughter named Judith Myrna and a son named Henry Burkley.

I worked for twenty-seven years in the Atlanta Public School System teaching English. Actually, I taught English, yearbook, African American studies, and drama. I taught everything, and I directed plays. During the summer, I would go to New York and work. I went to Connecticut several summers and stayed with my husband's two nieces and worked in restaurants in order to earn money to go to see plays on Broadway. I had an offer to be in a play, and I thought about accepting, but I had to turn it down because it was time to come home to my family. That's another thing. My husband was really great. When I went away, he was here with the kids. When he went away, I was here with the kids. He went to the University of Chicago in 1956 on a one-year grant to study mathematics. I went to Santa Barbara for a summer in 1968 and I returned there to study at UC Santa Barbara. That's where I earned my Master's in 1970. In 1974, I was one of twenty-five Atlanta Public School teachers selected by UCLA to go to West Africa. That was something my mother had expressed a longing to do: to see the place where our people came from first. I would go back to West Africa if I ever got the chance.

I went to Tallahassee for four or five years to direct plays at Florida State University, and I taught at the University for one semester or two. I went there because my daughter was working on a Master's degree in playwriting. She had written a play about African Americans, but there were no African Americans in the department, and only an African American could direct the play. My daughter said, "Well, my mother can direct it." So, I went there and I directed Judy's play.

My son was in the Air Force in Thailand, and I'm so grateful that he wasn't in Vietnam. And of course I am thankful that he came home from the War intact. My heart bleeds for parents who have children in the war now because I know the fear and worry about losing a child to war.

I loved teaching. I loved it. I started at W. H. Crogman Elementary School and from

there I went to Turner High School, where I taught for ten years, before being transferred to Harper High. I left Harper and went to Boyd Elementary School and, after two years, I was transferred to Jean Childs Middle School, but it was then called Southwest. I spent one year there, and then I took myself on home. I ran into one of my students recently, and he said, "Mrs. Allen, we talked about you and said you were mean, but we loved you." And I said, "You didn't know that I loved you, too, and I wanted for you what I wanted for my own children." I feel good about what I accomplished in my twenty-seven years of working with public school kids.

I really admire my mother and realize that I have so much of her in me. I do understand now, at this age, why my mother was patient with me. Just like my mother, I wanted success for my children. I wanted joy and peace and happiness for my children and my grandchildren, and I want it for you, too.