ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA

"STILL DREAMING"

"I say to you today, my friends, though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal."

Those words, spoken on August 23, 1963 on a sweltering day in our nation's capitol by Dr. Martin Luther King, still hold the power and majesty of the notion that we are a people who believe that all of us count for something, and none of us count for nothing. And today, you and I must stand, for better or for worse, as guardians of democracy and believe that there is truth and dignity, and hope for prosperity when ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, all cities that bear the scars of struggle and the nobility of change. Cities that sit on the soil of shared sorrows for those that suffered and died for equality. A place of repose. Monuments of stone that connect

us to each other. A place of hope and promise. A place to lay our grief down and shoulder the burden of moving beyond the sunset of despair to the place we call justice for all.

It is from there that I come to you this moment and to this place, on the road of my own life's personal journey that has been much different from so many of you.

I was born in 1950 in the red clay hills of south Alabama. My father was a lawyer and my mother was a housewife.

George and Lurleen Wallace met in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1942. Lurleen worked in a dime store and George had graduated from college and was about to enlist in the Army. After a short courtship they were married. She was sixteen. He was twenty-two.

There was nothing to suggest that the young couple would one day rise to power and control the history of politics in the State of Alabama for over three decades and play pivotal roles in the struggle for civil rights in Alabama and America. In 1942, they were just another young couple marrying before the War would separate them.

In the 1950's and 60's, racial intolerance crept around the outskirts of town. It was not something you knew; it was something you lived. At first it wasn't raucous and didn't cause much trouble, but the callouses it grew on the hearts of African mothers and fathers marked them so that their children could see their future in their parent's eyes.

Whole generations came and went. Some followed the bright lined roads out of the south, while others stayed and watched, as the roads north to freedom took a bend and brought them right back again.

But then there were voices. Hardly discernible at first but growing louder.

Songs of despair faded under the broader anthems of defiance. And as the seeds of a cultural revolution began to sprout, the south fought back to protect a society that promoted the notion that the very words of the America Declaration of independence had no application to American citizens of color.

America was creeping toward equality and destiny was propelling my parents into the eye of the storm, sweeping me into the vortex of the American Civil Rights Movement.

I was eight years old when my father ran for Governor, against the Ku Klux Klan and as a civil rights reformer and lost.

I was twelve years old when my father proclaimed "segregation today segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" in his inaugural address in January of 1963 after being sworn in as Governor of the State of Alabama.

In the spring of that year, he traveled to the University of Alabama and stood in the schoolhouse door to protest the integration of Alabama's colleges and universities

That day changed history and altered the course of the lives of Vivian Malone and James Hood.

And, it was also the day that changed my life as well.

As my father drove northwest on a black top road to Tuscaloosa and the University of Alabama, my mother took me to a wood framed cabin, set deep in a slough of Lake Martin, Alabama, a place that offered Lurleen Burns Wallace comfort of how her life used to be living alongside a rutted dirt road deep in the heart of Tuscaloosa County, simple, unobstructed and safe; a sense of peace that comes with escape.

My feet dangled from a makeshift swing laying low under the bough of an old oak tree as I watched my mother pace up and down a small wooden pier. It was as if a taut wire was dragging her back and forth as she pulled one hand through her coarse mane of thick brown hair while nursing a cigarette in the other. Her security detail of one had grown to a cadre of uniformed state troopers.

She stood alone and bereft.

"Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
What would it take my standing there for,
Holding open a restive door,
Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
Summer was past and the day was past.
Somber clouds in the west were massed."

I was thirteen years old. My mother was 36.

That day was the end of her hope for a simpler life for it was the beginning of our living beneath the shadow of the schoolhouse door.

How could she have known that in less than three years, she would become Governor of her State, the sixth most admired woman in the world and in less than five years, she would be dead, known by the world and loved by thousands.

After nightfall rode in silence back to the Governor's Mansion in Montgomery. That day was never mentioned again. It was as if it never happened.

As Governor Wallace continued his fight for segregation, he created an atmosphere that encouraged white southerners to react with violence. My father never built a bomb, never used a billy club, and never turned hoses on children, but his silence in reaction to those that did, was even more destructive.

Until I was married in 1973, I lived behind the gates of the Alabama Governor's Mansion as the war for equality raged about me. It was a safe retreat from the clamor and violence that was the civil rights movement. My life was one of quiet indifference, wondering why my father's vision of freedom and justice and his premise for a new and invigorated Alabama did not include protecting the rights of all of us rather than just some of us.

George Wallace was on the wrong side of history, riding on the wings of fear rather than seeking justice on the wings riding on the wings of eagles.

There may be no nobler call than the one to public service, but in the 1960's in Alabama, public service became synonymous with the politics of discrimination.

OUR family business WAS my father's politics and there were job descriptions for each of us. It was always about the next race for Governor then for President. My job was not to have an opinion, but if I did, it was to be shared with no one else.

I had neither the will nor the opportunity for a moment of personal enlightenment. I was fearful of change, of slipping away from the family nest, of betraying who I was, by becoming something better.

Over the years, I have been asked, "What did your father tell you about the stand in the schoolhouse door, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, segregation?"

There was never an offer of an explanation. When the subject was broached, I was brushed aside. It was always about the next race and rush to power.

Even so, it all seemed so illogical to me. My father was a lawyer, a respected former judge, he understood the constitution and I assumed was familiar with the Supreme Court opinion in Brown vs. Board of Education. He had seen other states fall in their support of forced segregation.

Although he had a legal obligation to follow the mandates of a federal court, he persisted and even negotiated for an opportunity to stand before the nation and argue for a lost cause.

I have read the words of historians, have heard the rhetoric of both the apologists and the skeptics but that alone will never satisfy my longing for the absoluteness of a simple answer, something my father never gave to me.

My father owed me a conversation, an explanation for what he had done or at least to share with my sons when they asked why.

The questions most often asked, are ones that I cannot answer, even in the private moments of my life.

Who was the man that was my father? Did he change his beliefs in his heart? Did he abandon his character for power? Did his end of life journey take him back to where he had begun?

Perhaps a brief conversation between a father and daughter, a hastily written note on a yellow legal pad would not have been too much to ask to heal the longing heart of a daughter who loved her father very much.

Witnessing the personal journey of my family as it unfolded across the pages of Alabama and American history is a story that may never be written, but the personal challenges and relationships that we endured would no doubt add new dimensions to the understanding of one of the most complex men in Alabama history. Although many viewed my father as a caricature of absolutes and bright lined edges, for me he was a man hidden in a grey mist of contradictions.

History will remind us of George Wallace's own journey on the Road to Jericho after he was paralyzed by an assassin's bullet in a shopping center parking lot in Laurel Maryland. It was through his own personal pain and suffering that he saw the hurt of history in the eyes of African men and women who had been denied their right to live the American Dream. He sought forgiveness for what he had done, and he was forgiven by many of those that he had wronged. In 1982, he was elected Governor for his fourth and last time only because of the outpouring of support from the very people that he fought so hard to deny them the right to vote, African Americans. That vote still stands as a symbol of the power of forgiveness.

One cannot travel far in Alabama without being reminded of the life and times of George and Lurleen Wallace as colleges, bridge and roads, hospitals and parks bear their name.

But for whatever he became, there will ALWAYS be an asterisk by the name of George Wallace as a reminder of the man who stood in the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama.

When I think of possibilities lost, I am reminded of the words of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

What could my father have become, had he taken the road less travelled in June of 1963 as when he rode through the lush green Countryside splashed with the color of blooming dogwoods on his way to Tuscaloosa and the schoolhouse door.

But that was not to be.

For most of my life, I lived in the shadow of history. My life was measured by the accomplishments of others. I was the daughter, then wife of powerful men. My life was measured by their success and never by my own. Always supporting but never leading, always learning but never teaching, always loving others but never loving myself, always believing in others, but never in me, always in the crowd but never breaking away. Believing that my life would be measured by the accomplishments of others, but never by my own.

And then, my husband and I took our then eight-year-old son, Burns, to Atlanta to visit the Martin Luther King National Historic Site. The museum chronicled the life and times of Dr. Martin Luther King, including his fight for freedom in Alabama. As we moved through the exhibits, we turned a corner only to face the visual images of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, fire hoses in Birmingham and a defiant George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door.

Burns stood silent as the truth of his legacy washed over him. Then he turned to me. "Why did Paw Paw do those things to other people?" he asked.

I realized at that moment that I was at a crossroad in my life and the life of my son. The mantle had passed, and it was now time for me to do for Burns what my father never did for me.

I knelt down and drew Burns close to me. "Paw Paw never told me why he did those things, but I know he was wrong. So now it will be up to me and you to help make things right."

From that day forward I knew that I had an obligation to my children and to myself to begin a personal journey to raise the call for justice in my lifetime.

It was time for breaking away, seeing myself separate and apart, feeling the importance of leaving a legacy of my own where one day my children would first think of their mother and what she became, before their minds eye would turn to the notoriety and fame of their grandfather, George Wallace.

And today, I bear witness to you that all of us, including each of you, have the power to change first our own lives and then the lives of others.

When I was a small child, I would walk beside my grandfather, Mr. Henry, while he and his plow mule Bertis, broke ground for summer crops. Mr. Henry held the reins tight so he could guide Bertis in a straight line from one end of the field to the other. I carried a branch off a sweet gum tree to use on Bertis's backside if she tried to kick over the traces.

Traces were the long pieces of leather that connected the plow to the harness around Bertis's neck. If Bertis had kicked or jumped over the traces, she would be out of control and was most likely going to walk through the field like she wanted to rather than how Mr. Henry thought she was supposed to.

Over the past few years, I have often thought of Bertis and Mr. Henry working the fields until they disappeared into the darkness of a summer nightfall. I smile when I think that perhaps I have done something that Bertis was never allowed to do. I have jumped the traces and am plowing furrows on my own.

My life is no longer about sticking to the straight line with my soul burdened by other's expectations.

There are those that look over their shoulders at me, as they are confined by the traces of the past and criticize my wandering. To some I am a traitor, to others I am a disrespectful child and to many, my past and the sins of our fathers make me suspect.

But for all those that believe in change and truth, the fallow fields of America are a patchwork of lines, angles, circles and squares created by a new generation of Americans who have dared to kick over the traces.

There will be no more stands in the schoolhouse door, but how many hearts will be broken, and lives wasted on the wrong side of the schoolhouse door.

There will be no more fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham but how many low-income Americans will see their children suffer and die for lack of access to healthcare.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge is now a monument to change rather than a battleground for justice, but how far has America really come if there are thousand upon thousands of Americans who still cannot vote.

How many more anniversaries of the struggle for civil rights can we celebrate by looking over our shoulders rather than standing shoulder to shoulder to face the challenges ahead?

Is there a Martin Luther King or an Abraham Lincoln among us? Or do we empower ourselves to make individual small steps that can lead to giant leaps.

How can our children reach for higher ground if we do not inspire them with what we do? How can we educate our children about positive social change when we see injustice and turn our backs? How can we do nothing when we read about gun violence, dead end streets of opportunities, lost and thrown away children in jail and expect our children to do something.

Tolerance must be more than what we believe, it must be what we live, and teaching tolerance is what we must do.

One can never measure the true worth of a mended heart that beats again because someone cared.

There is power in confidence, in feeling loved and respected for who you are and what you believe, it is the reaching out and touching a soul that brings out the humanity in others

An opportunity for each of you, an obligation for all of us, to see others, feel others and celebrate others, respecting their humanity for who they are.

We must live our lives with inspiration, always aspiring to make the choices that lead us to higher ground, that guides us to understanding and purpose, of not just WHO we are but WHO we can become.

All of us are unique. All of us have a history. All of us have a story. A story that is worth the telling.

Sharing the highs and the lows. Not expecting others to pour their heart out to us while we keep our uniqueness behind a locked heart.

There is power in who we are and where we come from. Every one of us cannot live on a stage for all to see, but all of us have something to share about what makes us unique, the fabric of our lives. We must know where we have come from before we chart our course for the future.

And how can others dream if we are not still dreaming.

So I am here today to tell you that for the sake of my two sons and for those that will remember me after I am gone, I have charted my own course to do what I can to rise above the history of yesterdays and look over the sunset, for the promise of a new dawn of justice and equality for all.

I speak for myself, not to condemn my father, for history will define him best, but to share with you where my journey began and to promise you that my life's destination will be of my own choosing.

None of us can be responsible for the circumstances of our birth, but each of us will be help responsible for what we become.

A promise, that when we say, "all men are created equal", it means something, protects something and encourages us to embrace the belief that the diversity among us has nothing to do with equality but has everything to do with strength of character and country.

The struggle for justice, equality, freedom, acceptance, and understanding did not end in the 1960's. And while thousands may never march again down a two-laned blacktop road from Selma to Montgomery, each of you must be vigilant in your hearts and minds each day.

While some will climb mountains, there are untold numbers of small hills that we all can master. Tokens and gestures, words and deeds that can change a life and change history.

Never sell yourself short, like I did for so many years.

Your voice counts use it for something rather than falling for anything.

AND RISE, to proclaim that for too many Americans, the schoolhouse door of opportunity, equality and freedom remains closed.

RISE up to protect the rights of others. For America is at her best when she embraces all of us, protects the least of us and offers her bounty of hope and prosperity to not just some of us.

RISE to not just remember how far we have come but to commit to the struggle that lies ahead.

RISE to stand in a school house door everyday, to encourage a friend, to speak, to walk and to pray for justice for all in our country.

AND RISE to challenge one another to stand your ground, reach for a higher star, stand firm when all others fade away, be courageous and proclaim a victory of your own, rise up for yourself and for your dignity ---------- so that one day your children and your grandchildren can say that your life was not lived in vain.

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