JOHN PARKER

Based on interviews in Monrovia June 2023 by Susie Ling. Edited with John Parker.

MONROVIA ALL MY LIFE

I'm now living in the same block as when I was first born in 1952. I've lived all my life in Monrovia – except for the years I was in college at CSU San Luis Obispo. During college, I was gone for 9 months out of the year, but back in Monrovia for the summer months. I did travel around the United States with my basketball teams, and it only made me appreciate Monrovia more. We've always had diversity. The city is planned out well; you don't really need a car. There are programs for the youth and for the elderly. The city has grown and grown – despite recessions. I guess the only problem is parking; I guess that's a good problem. I remember when they built Arcadia Mall, Monrovia's retail took a hard hit. All the big stores moved out there, and it was like a ghost town until Bob Bartlett turned it around. There's been a lot of changes in Monrovia in these seventy years. I just love it here; I'll be buried here.

Monrovia was segregated, and our neighborhood south of Huntington Drive was racially mixed with African Americans, Asians, and Latinos. Whites called this area "the ghetto" and ignored us. Before the War, this area was mostly empty with orchards and open fields. My parents moved to 222 Central in 1951. That house was identical to my current house. These were G.I. houses. But more people started to build near 1961; the lots got sub-divided. My parents built a new house on Fig in 1962 after the freeway came through. Everybody here knew each other. There were a few White families – mostly single elderly White women like Granny, Suzie, and Mrs. Blaeloc (sp?). My brother, Skip, and I cleaned up her yard for her. But people got along here even though there was much turmoil and race problems in the City and in the United States. Our parents came out to prove that African Americans are decent community people.[1] They stayed here through the worst parts and even made it better.

People got along here because we were in the same boat. All the kids were about the same age, and we grew up together. My parents always said, "You can bring everybody home." Others would come over to my house whether you were Asian, Latino, Black or White. There weren't that many Asians. Latinos had a little more privilege as some were considered "Caucasian" on their birth certificates. In my parents' generation, they couldn't try clothes on in the department stores in uptown Myrtle. Even today, I don't go often to Myrtle.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the 210 Freeway was coming through. Although my parents' first home was sold for the freeway, it took years before the freeway was built and then extended to San Dimas, and then beyond. But by the 1980s, a lot of African Americans from Monrovia started to move to the Inland Empire and out east. They got a lot more property for their money, but I'm glad I stayed.

MY FAMILIES

My father was Julius Parker (1924-2018). He was born in Guthrie, Oklahoma. His mother, Ollie Wigley (1903-1976), was married to Elmer Barmore, a Pullman porter, and they came to Monrovia in 1931.[2] My

[1] Although there were 1960s race riots at the Monrovia High and in the community, Monrovia leaders like Mimi Mency, Julius Parker, Reverend G. G. Bailey, and many others were very involved in finding solutions.

[2] According to Ancestry.com, Elmer Anthony Barmore was born on 13 June 1903 in Winnwood, Oklahoma and died in 1952. In the 1910 census, he lived in Wynnwood Ward in Oklahoma with Elva Barmore (father) and Clara

dad and his sister, Dorinda, came in 1933. Elmer died the night before I was born. He bought the first organ for Second Baptist Church. Fanny Goodwin Hall of Second Baptist Church is related to us through Mr. Barmore. Dad didn't get along with his stepfather and went into the service when he was old enough in 1943. Dad and Dorinda would call their stepfather "Mr. Barmore."

We knew Ollie growing up. I even remember her mother, Susanah Wigley, coming out on the train from Oklahoma.[3] She would stay for months at a time. My sister, Suzan, was name after our great-grandmother. Ollie was a very strong Black woman. She graduated from college, but California wouldn't let her teach. She did domestic work for the Stone family above Foothill. I was crazy about my grandmother; she was my best friend. When she came to get us, we would spend a night with her on Maple. She would serve us this "rich White breakfast" with silverware, orange juice, cinnamon rolls, eggs and Canadian bacon. Skip and I would do her yard. Elmer was traveling a lot, but he would give Ollie his checks while he lived on his tips. She saved and saved and bought 514 E. Maple between Shamrock and California. They lived on Cypress and then Canyon before I came around. When I was a child, most of the African Americans here owned their homes.

My mother was Hazel Powers Parker (1929-2012). She was born in Chanute, Kansas. She had 4 sisters and 2 brothers. They moved to California in 1939, and they lived in San Bernardino, Pasadena, Duarte, and Monrovia. Camillous and Alberta Powers, her parents, were divorced.[4] I'm actually living in Camillous' house that was built in 1950. When I was growing up, I didn't know him well, but my mother took care of him near his end. Alberta or "Nanny" we knew better.[5] She was a live-in up and down the coast; she drove a lot. She even took care of her father, my great-grandfather, who was John Pinchem.[6]

Goodwin (Elva's sister). In the 1920 census, Elmer was living with an Uncle McNeal in Oklahoma. In the 1940 census, he was at 514 E. Maple in Monrovia. California records show that he married Ollie Marie on 5 October 1931 in Los Angeles. Ollie Marie Wigley's first marriage was with Julius Parker from Texas on 19 April 1924 in Oklahoma. Ollie was born 22 July 1903 and died on 3 May 1976.

[3] In the 1920 census, it shows "Allie" Wigley (16) living at 1920 W. Perkins in Logan, Oklahoma with her father, John Wigley (59, born in Mississippi, and a laborer), S.A. Wigley (54, both in Mississippi), Bulea (20, widowed daughter), Althea (13), Imagene Resse (2, granddaughter to John Wigley), and Kozine Reese (0, granddaughter to John Wigley). Althea would come to Monrovia and become Julian Fisher's second wife. She was born in 1906 and died on 15 August 1987. Her mother's maiden name is listed as "Martin."

[4] Ancestry.com shows Camillous to be born 5 July 1897 in Ottawa, Kansas and died on 11 May 1978 in Monrovia. In the 1920 census, he was living with a cousin in Wisconsin. In the 1930 census, he was a sheet and metal worker living at 218 N. Central Street in Chanute, Kansas with his wife, Alberta. In the 1940 census, he was a hotel porter living at 812 N. Locust St in Ottawa, Franklin, Kansas with his family. In 1970, he was living at 273 E. Central in Monrovia with Hyacinth Powers.

[5] Alberta Eleanor Pinchem Powers was born on 27 August 1906 at Wabaunsee, Kansas and died 3 November 1977 in Pomona, Calif. In the 1910 census, she was listed as "Birdee Pinchem" living with her parents, John and Lottie. In the 1920 census, she was living in Wabaunsee. In the 1930 census she was living at 218 N. Central Street in Chanute, KS. In the 1940 census, she was living with Camillous at 812 N. Locust Street in Ottawa, KS with these children: Alice June (15), Florence Evelyn (13), Valeria (12), Hazel May (10), Helen Dolores (9), Camillous (6), and Glendale (4).

[6] John Willard (maybe Wesley) Pinchem was born in 1874 in Wabaunsee, Kansas to John Pincheon (sp?, 1838-1902) and Louiza Terry (1839-1902). John W. married Charlotte Jane or "Lottie" on 7 March 1900 at Wabaunsee. In the 1930 census, John Pinchem is listed as a laborer in Eskridge, Wabaunsee. In the 1940 census, John is living on 85 Norman Road in San Bernardino with Lottie (53), Leslie (19), Glenn (16), and George (13). In the 1950 census, he is listed at 85 Norman Road. He died on 2 August 1970, at the age near 96. These are his children: Charley Allen (b. 1888), Hazel Ione (1901), John Omer Frankline (1903), Marshall Grant (1904), Alberta Eleanor (1906), Florence (1908), Margerie (1913), Albert Thomas (1916), Leslie Allen (1921), George Thomas (1923), Sylvia Illene (1925),

We called him “Papa”. Papa had a big farm on Norman Road in San Bernardino with vegetables, hogs, chicken, geese… It was not a garden. We would go there every once in a while, and it was a big place for an African American. Nanny would bring him over to visit. She drove so much that we would laugh and say, “Here she comes on two wheels” as she was drifting. Papa told us so many amazing stories. He lived to about 100 years old, from seeing horse and buggy to John Glenn go into space. I think he had about sixteen children. I do have Pinchem cousins there in Ridgecrest.

She was smart, but I don’t know if my mother went to high school. The Powers were very poor. Although my mother was raised with little, she would give and give – often with her million dollar smile. My mother said once that they were so poor, they didn’t have a nickel for a loaf of bread. She left the family and got married near fifteen. My half-brother, Michael, was born in 1945. My dad raised Michael since he was a baby. My brother, Ralph or “Skip”, was born in 1951; there’s only 13 months between us. Ralph was named after Ralph Ruff, a guy from Georgia that my father served with in the 29th and 17th Special Services Co. I was named after my two great-grandfathers: John Wigley and John Pinchem. Then, there’s Suzie, David, and Sylvia.

I don’t know how my parents got together. Everyone knew of the five “Powers girls”, and my mother was very pretty. She could sing opera although she never had a lesson in her life. Dad came back from the service in 1946. He was a tenor saxophone player in the Army and played with John Lewis, later of the Modern Jazz Quartet. My parents loved music and would go to the jazz clubs on Central Avenue in Los Angeles. When the bigtime jazz musicians – like Dexter Gordon or John Lewis - came to down, they would all get together in the corner or gas stations and jam. They also went out to Fontana or somewhere and jam. Everyone who came to Los Angeles had to pass Monrovia via Route 66. In those days, people would stay with other African Americans. People were welcomed.

When I was a child, the intercom was a big thing. And my dad built this intercom system and played 105.1 KBCA jazz on all the time. We played other music once we got those little transistor radios. I still love jazz. Unfortunately, I can’t play, sing, or dance… I just draw (laughs).

My dad integrated Santa Fe School after the 1933 earthquake ordeal. So he made sure we all went to Santa Fe Elementary – instead of Huntington School. Integration was fine from kindergarten to fourth grade. But as we got older, we started to notice more racism. We were called the N word and got picked on. For example on Valentine’s Day, we wouldn’t get cards because we were African Americans. The thing is that it was easier for us when we went to junior high at Clifton’s. I had been with Whites since kindergarten; I had some friends. I think the White kids in Santa Fe were more acquainted with Blacks. The other African American kids were from the South and then Huntington School. At Clifton, it was hard for them. I was more able to decipher kids who were racist; you just had to have that dimension. There were places you shouldn’t go; you had a feeling and you knew.

When I was in college, Cal Poly classmates still thought African Americans had tails. In the locker room, I had people looking at me, wanting to touch my hair, and all that. I didn’t get mad because they were just ignorant. If their mom and dad taught them that Blacks had tails, who were they going to believe? There were a lot of Whites who never had to deal with Blacks, but we Blacks always had to deal with Whites. They had the stores, they had everything. The only reason Monrovia had an integrated junior

Olene Bernice (1927), Charles Andrew (1929), George Lincoln (1929), Oliver Lemuel (1931), and Myrtle Maryella (1933). Charlotte Jane Allen was born on 4 August 1884 at Wabaunsee, Kansas and died on 10 August 1960 in San Bernardino. Her mother’s maiden name was Johnson.

high and high school was because there was only one. If they had two high schools, they would have segregated them.

I learned from an early age that you can't be mad, you have to educate folks. I'm really into integration; I don't like segregation.

TWO PASSIONS: ART AND SPORTS

I was at Monrovia High between 1966 and 1970. It was easier for me at Monrovia High because I was a star in sports. I was Boys League president and a member of the Monarchs, an honors club. I was also a top artist. My "Green Machine" was hung on the gym wall for over 30 years! I could go to White people's houses – as long as I didn't try to date their daughters (laughs).

My dad loved baseball, and he would listen to games on the radio. As young boys, we started baseball on the field at Wyland Way. Teams were racially integrated. We would walk down California Avenue to get to the field. Sometimes, Whites would drive by and pick us up. I think most of the coaches were White except for Mr. Bourne. But as athletes – even at the high school, we all had one common goal and that was to win. Still, after games, we went one way and the Whites went another way. We never really thought about it. Once in a while, we went together to Shakey's or The Freeze. Tasty Freeze was on the southwest corner of Huntington and California and it had a big parking lot. In the 1970s, the Black car club, the Viceroys, would hang out there too.

When I was playing high school sports in the late 1960s, very few Blacks played for the baseball team. More Blacks played Pony League and then Connie Mack at Recreation Park. Actually, there weren't that many Black athletes at Monrovia High – but we played all the sports. I would play football, basketball, and track. The Blacks would hang out together. We couldn't sit under the oak tree.

I was right there when the race riots broke out in 1969. All of a sudden, people were fighting, trash cans flying around… It was weird because as an athlete, the good people liked you and the bad people liked you. So I just walked through it all and went home. But those were some bad times.

We athletes got along. At that time, the Administration had little to do with the Athletic Department. This was a period of race riots – but the athletes got along. We athletes still get together now even though we are in our 70's.

I was also worried about the Vietnam draft lottery. During my year, the lottery number went up to 170, and I was 172. Wow! But then they moved the numbers because so many people were getting killed in Vietnam; the number went to 175. Luckily, I got a student deferment as I was in my first year in college. I didn't want to go to Vietnam. The Vietnamese didn't do anything to us Blacks, and we Blacks were getting treated bad here in America. I was eighteen, and I didn't want to go. I was thinking about Canada.

As I go through life, I may see things differently. Maybe because I'm an artist, I pay attention to details. For example, if a White man's grandfather hung my grandfather, I wouldn't hate that grandson. He is not his grandfather. That's what hurts us: if a minority did something bad, all minorities were blamed for it. I never liked that, and I don't want to do that to somebody else. But a lot of Blacks didn't like White people. My parents were raised in towns that were really racist to them, but they did not bring that to

our home. All they taught was love, and bring people home. Good people are good people. Of course, it was up to me to receive what my parents taught, and I did.

My brother, Skip, and I were almost the same age, and we grew up in the same room – but we were totally different. We were night and day. He was a hippie with a charmed lifestyle. He had no enemies. He didn't play sports. Growing up, I was the loner. Even at Santa Fe Elementary, I stuck to myself. I wouldn't talk much. Maybe I didn't trust people. Except for Granny Ollie, I was close to her and lived there after college. As an adult, I did take care of all my siblings and then my parents. I was the caretaker and rescuer.

Ron Husband is two years older than me, and he was a major mentor to me – even to this day. We played football together; he was a leading running back when he was a senior. And, we were the only two Black artists. Ron was able to support himself with his art. Later, he got his dream job at Disney. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had hoped to play pro-basketball. Art is 24-7 and you have to be kind of selfish. I couldn't make money with art. I had a daughter while I was a junior in college, and I had to work. My dad said, "Any job is a good job as long as it is legal." I did a job because it is a job. I was a janitor, a factory worker, a campus aide… I never had a job that I really wanted, but I had to work. I worked for Monrovia High and then for Edison.

My art has always had an African American theme, but I can't tell you why. When I was in high school, I really focused on starving children in America. Near 1974, I pierced my left ear for the starving kids in America. At that time, people would wear bands but I pierced my ear. America is so rich and wasteful on one side, but other folks are starving. Not everybody has the same chance or opportunity. If I have more than enough, than I should help somebody. Later on, I got to thinking about starving children in the world – so I pierced my right ear. Even as a young child, I was sensitive to things.

I looked at my dad. He never complained, he raised us all. I told myself that I wanted to work and get off his meal ticket. I played all the sports so that my chances of getting a scholarship for college would be greater. But going into sports was great for me.

I was a tiny kid. I got into high school at 6'1" and 98 pounds. When I graduated, I was 6'2" at 165 pounds. Back then, freshmen couldn't play varsity sports, and it was rare for sophomores. I played varsity football, basketball and track as a sophomore, and I was a starter. In those days, on game days, the varsity team had to dress up all day and wear ties – not clip-on ties. We had to show discipline. We had to wear blazers with emblems that said "Monrovia Varsity". And then I made varsity basketball as a sophomore too; I was also a starter. But that was a different blazer with a different color. I felt so bad but my dad never complained about the cost. Then I got into an Honors group called the Monarchs; they had another blazer with another color. I was also on varsity track. Then every year, the football team would change the color of their blazers. My dad never complained.

I never even played sports at Clifton's until 8th grade when the PE teacher recruited me for flag football. At an assembly, the Monrovia High basketball team came to show-off some drills. I was so impressed that I decided I wanted to be a basketball player like them. And I wanted to be with that coach: Tony Stillson, the best coach I ever had in my life. At the high school, you had to sign up for 6th period PE to play so I did that. They first put me in football; I got on the B Team. I got on the B Team for basketball in Spring. But I was surprised that during my sophomore year, I was put on varsity. I guess coaches saw something in me that I did not know. I was a wide receiver behind Herbie Holmes. In the first game, Herbie twists his ankle, and they played me. I had a great season. Eventually, I was First Team All

League, First Team All Valley, Athlete of the Year, and Wildcat of the Year. I was the first junior to ever get Wildcat of the Year. All together, I played 3 years of varsity football, 3 years of varsity basketball and 2 years of varsity track. As a senior and the center, our basketball team won the League and I was MVP of our team, MVP of the League, MVP of the Valley, and First Team All CIF 4A.

All of us in Monrovia wanted to be like the greatest athlete that ever played sports in Monrovia: Fair Hooker (1947-). When we were kids, we would watch him practice in the open field at Huntington School. He used to live on Cherry. Not only was he the best athlete ever, he was a good person. He inspired me play sports. After being a wide receiver at Monrovia High – as well as playing basketball and track, Fair went on to Arizona State. In 1969, he was drafted into the NFL by the Cleveland Browns.

After high school, I got a full ride basketball scholarship to San Luis Obispo. In those days, NCAA rules said you couldn't play varsity as freshmen. But we had the best freshmen team of the school's history at 21-4. Then I was on the varsity team. In my senior year, I was All-Conference player. We won the League championship. I was second leading scorer, leading rebounder, and best defensive player. And I was only 6'3".

But after you climb this mountain, nobody tells you that it ends on a cliff. I played a little bit semi-pro ball after, but that was it. We had put in a lot of time, and there were a lot of injuries. I had seven knee surgeries. But then it ends. The other guys I played with, basketball was all they had. We'd all eat, think, sleep basketball. A few of them failed in life and some even committed suicide. We put all this time in, but in the end, it is a very small business. It isn't only that you are not good enough, but maybe it is also because there's no room for you. In my 30's, I knew I had to let it go. I was Assistant Varsity Coach at Monrovia for about six to eight years, and I also coached at Muir High for about eight years. Muir had a high percentage of African Americans, but at that time I was the only Black coach. It helped that I had a second passion: art.

About eight years ago, I got put into Monrovia High's Sports Hall of Fame. I invented the "Green Machine" in 1967. It was like a robot. My painting used to hang on the gym wall for 30+ years. It was 8 x 10 feet. I also painted the mascot on the gym floor a couple of times.

My art teacher at Monrovia High was Dorothy Clemmons, and she taught me so much. At Cal Poly, I was an art minor but most of my classmates were striving to be elementary school teachers and not real art majors. They let me do whatever I wanted because it really wasn't an art school; I was the only Black. What I do today is thanks to Dorothy Clemmons. She really encouraged me to do Black art. When I did shows with the Monrovia Art Festival when I was in high school, I would be the only African American. MAFA did give me $200 scholarships for four years. When White people do White art, nobody says anything. Black art is who I am. I feel we need representation. I never knew a Black artist coming up. The first one I got introduced to was Charles White. He inspired me so much. I now have all his books. If there is a rose in my picture, that's a tribute to Charles W. White.

My math teacher gave me a book on Charles White; she was a friend of Miss Clemmons. Miss Clemmons took me to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena and the LA County Museum near the La Brea Tarpits. Miss Clemmons also talked to me about SAT tests. I didn't know anything about that. Without the SAT test, I would've had to go to junior college. Most Blacks at that time did not go straight to a 4-year school. She actually paid for my test. Our counselors were well-intending maybe, but they didn't encourage Blacks to go to 4-year schools. That was just the way it was.

When I was working as a janitor at Monrovia High, Miss Clemmons let me draw in her classroom at night. We stayed in contact. She wrote me a letter every single year, mostly about her travels. She lived near Laguna Beach when she retired. When she died, she left me art books and $500 in her will. She was strict, she was bossy, but she was inspirational.

I know that if I do art pieces featuring Michael Jackson or Michael Jordan, it would sell. But that's not me. God gave me a gift to do something else. It may not be liked, but that's what I do.

It always bothered me that in the Black community, you are pushed to be a superstar. You couldn't just be average. When I was a freshman at Monrovia High, nobody noticed me. But then when I got into sports, I got a lot of attention. But I was still the same person. You get this pressure that you are only liked because of what you've achieved. That's sad and hurtful. I want to be a nice average guy; I didn't want to be a superstar. Fame wasn't what I was seeking.

I liked team sports. I wasn't into individual accolades. I loved the team championships; we were all smiling and together. But the expectations are too high on superstars. You can't even sneeze without people looking at you. There was a lot of pressure to achieve. We always played Fridays and Saturdays then. Everyone was cheering for us since I was in junior high. And after all that, you become a spectator, and you don't even know what to do on Fridays and Saturdays. I was lost. It was so high and then down to become an "average Joe" at such a young age. I was 22. And everybody had these expectations on me. I had been voted "most likely to succeed".

BEING A BLACK MAN

I had to support my baby daughter. First, I was a student aide. But that's no money. I applied and got the job as a janitor at Monrovia High. It was a big transition. But it was a fulltime job that would provide for my family, and I'm not going to let my pride get in the way. Even Leroy Criss, a Tuskegee Airmen and a graduate of Monrovia High, couldn't get hired at Monrovia High; he taught in Los Angeles for almost 40 years.

In those days, Monrovia High's gym was open at night for adults to play basketball. A lot of African Americans went out there to work out. We saw that there were organized teams playing league organized by Monrovia. They would pick up some big trophies. So we tried to sign up to join too. We were told that it was all full. Ten minutes later, we got our buddy, Steve, an all-American White guy from Arcadia to go in to sign up. And he got us in. So now we are mad. We won the league. But instead of giving out big trophies, they gave us little ones. Monrovia did some bad stuff. This was in the late 1970s.

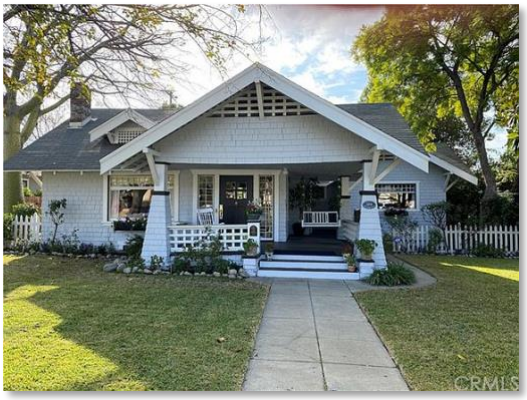
I've worked hard, and I've never been arrested. As a Black man, that's saying a lot. I think I've gotten stopped about 20 to 30 times in my life. I learned that you just can't say anything. About 3 months ago, I got stopped by Monrovia police here on California Avenue. The officer was going down Huntington Drive, and he makes a wide U-turn to follow me. I go down a little way and pull over near some neighbors who know me. I never took my hands off the steering wheel. The officer comes up to my window and asks if I have my seatbelt on. I look down at my belt – never taking my hands off the wheel. I said, "Yes, my belt is on." He says, "Are you sure?" I had to get my license. I would never reach in my glove compartment as the other officer is on the other side. I'm asking myself, "Why are they stopping a 71-year old man? Is this for my seatbelt?" That bothered me. 99% of the time, they would say, "You looked suspicious." What does that mean? What does suspicious look like? But I never say anything. I'm just so so sad.

With the new generation of African Americans, they talk too much. They don't know how to be humble. I say, "You have to take it. We have had too many martyrs; we don't need any more." We have to be patient and hold back. I'm not saying it's fair, but I don't want to be dead right. I have a son. It bothers me he could be stopped.

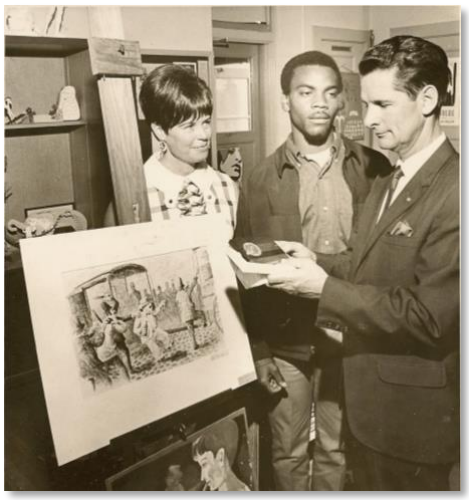
I don't consider myself "African American," I think of myself as an American of African descent. I'm from here. Whites don't have to say they are European Americans. We African Americans built this country; we contributed to this country. We don't want anything extra; we just want what's due to us from the Constitution. I still love America.

Here's an interesting story. When it was time, my wife and I worked very hard to select a convalescent home for my daddy. We chose one that was on Foothill and Ivy, right here in town. We were all ready to go but at the very last minute, my dad absolutely refused. It turned out that this home is on the geographical site of the old Lyric Theater. As a teen, Dad worked at the Lyric before the War. It was a segregated institution. We had to find a second convalescent home in Temple City.

I think about my parents every day. Mom was always about kindness. She was beautiful inside and out. She would give and give – with her million dollar smile. My parents took us to the beach sometimes and Yosemite every summer. I still camp every year. Many years ago, I had a difficult divorce, and with all the pressures of working, I didn't draw for about 25 years. But then with Covid – and George Floyd – I really got back and have done a lot pencil work in the last 3 years. All Black art.



514 E. Maple was built in 1910.



Ms. Clemmons, Ron Husband and Principal Morris. C. 1970.