**JOURNEY TO RESTORATION**

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*Wichita*

In the words of the 2004 NFL Hall of Famer, Barry Sanders, “Volutsia’s Calling”. That was the title of chapter 1 in his memoir “*Now you See Him.* Like Barry, my *calling* also began on Volutsia Street. As a child I was only a stone's throw away from where Barry grew up with his parents, and 10 siblings. My parents William (Donald) and Joyce Drake were kin to the Sanders and moved to the same neighborhood. To me, they were Uncle William and Aunt Shirley. They significantly influenced my early child development. The way I would later strive to serve others and carry myself as an adult was a direct result of the impact they had on me. The Sanders residence was just six houses down the street on a two block stretch of Volutsia Street, one mile west of Wichita State University.

It was a segregated community that was identified as the "black" side of town. Aunt Shirley conducted outdoor child evangelism classes and bible studies for the neighborhood kids. My mother wouldn’t allow us to spend the night at anyone's home except our parent's families, I credit the many days we spent at the Sanders house with Aunt Shirley for giving me a heart for children and a passion for child evangelism. Although the house was quite small for the number of people who lived there, our time at the Sanders playing with my cousins was full of love, joy and happiness. These were happy times that will be etched in my mind forever.

The Sanders home was always a welcoming place where we could have a slumber party, foot races in the street, and backyard picnics. Because of Uncle William's hospitable nature, we enjoyed "roasting weenies" late into the night in his big metal trash can using wire clothes hangers or perfectly crafted sticks to char the wieners. We filled our bellies with hotdogs, chips, and pop while we sang songs and played around the backyard campfire. These get togethers even continued long after my family moved from the neighborhood. Over the course of the next 50 years we moved out of state and the Sanders moved to the "other" side of town but we still found our way back to the “heart” of Volutsia Street. The street addresses may have changed but our traditions didn’t. We still found our way back to the Sanders new residence for slumber parties, backyard wiener roasts and the same family fun. The same activities that shaped our childhood on Volutsia Street. Their new home was a far cry from their humble beginnings. Although the acreage around the property and the square footage of the house changed, they never did. Their home continued to be filled with the same hospitality, affection, compassion, strength, discipline and love. It was these early life-lessons that have shaped and forged my morals, values and ethics.

My parents were born in different parts of Oklahoma but somehow as children, the hearts of their parents aligned and each of their nuclear families migrated to Wichita, Kansas. I was born Willda A. Drake. That's Willda with two L’s because my father was hoping for a William, Jr. Choosing a name that began with Will was the closest he could get, until my brother was born a year later. My parents took me home from Wesley Medical Center where my big sister Viveca was waiting for me. Here on Volutsia Street we would eventually become a quiver of five little ones whose parents were trying to navigate their way through the segregated streets of Wichita. In fact, the only white people I had ever seen was the police officer who gave me a lift home after finding me on the swing set at Ingalls’s Elementary School, while waiting for my big sister to come out. My kindergarten teacher, Mrs. March was white and I had a great-aunt, a nice, old white woman that was married to my paternal grandmother’s brother.

Despite the obstacles and the stress of raising a young family in this segregated community, my parents laid a foundation and cornerstones that would forever impact and shape my life towards a successful career path. The step-stones they laid were secured with a mortar that would interlock family, strength, resilience, courage and work ethic. These values were shaped into a kinship of faith in God as the chief cornerstone. My parents and grandparents set the trajectory for my journey through life and a career path that would eventually intersect my love of sports and desire to help others.

Most of my friends and associates have never heard of Wichita. Their only association with Kansas was the Wizard of OZ. Kansas was founded in 1864 and is called the Sunflower State. It has robust history full of folklore and urban legends including stories of Marshall Wyatt Earp, and Billy the Kidd. Because of the segregation and social injustice of the era, in 1958, a Wichita drug store was the site of the first national sit-in where college students demanded equal rights for the citizens who were not allowed to be served because of their color.

Wichita is the birthplace of Pizza Hut, Phillips 66 gas stations, White Castle Hamburgers and is called “The Air Capital of the World!” Along with Barry Sanders, Wichita is the birthplace of the first great NFL running back, Gale Sayers. Mr. Sayers became my first sports hero after learning of his story in the 1971 movie *"Brian's Song."* The great Olympian, Lynette Woodard also hails from Wichita.

My maternal grandfather, Alonzo “Johnny” Fisher, was a bricklayer whose handiwork can be found all around the city. His mother, whom we called Mother Pearlie had family origins that have been traced as far back to Madagascar, an "Island Country” off the Southeast coast of Africa, in the Indian Ocean. My earliest memories of Wichita were times spent at my great-grandmother's house following her and my older sister around as she collected eggs from the chicken coop. I was terrified at the sound of the city-wide public warning sirens that notified us of an impending thunderstorm or Tornado. I will never forget the fear of having to go down to take cover in the darkness of the underground cellar, with scary spider webs stretching from wall to wall, rusty old cans of beans, and an old toilet that I dreaded the thought of having to ever use. Despite that, I have a vivid recollection of the safety of knowing we were with our great grandmother and being told to huddle close as the winds and rains passed. Mama Pearl's son Johnnie, whom we fondly called "Granddaddy," was a laborer known in the community as "Johnny Fisher." He was a quiet, strong and extremely hardworking man. Unfortunately, he didn't grow up with knowing his father who was killed while trying to cast a vote during an election in the midst of the Jim Crow period, sometime in the early 20th century. Despite the fact that the 15th Amendment prohibited each state the denial of a citizen the right to vote based on race, or color, there were a sector of white nationalist who were determined to keep black people enslaved whether they were in chains working in the fields, or in chains due to the denial of basic rights. This far too common travesty of injustice is the foundation for several personal convictions I espouse to today. Convictions like, if I can help it, "never sitting in the back" or especially, making sure to exercise my right to vote. I feel very fortunate to have learn this awful, but sacred family story from my Aunt Carolyn who knows I have a penchant for history; especially my own black history. As my sister Viveca says: Black History Matters and that history must continue to be told. I find it remarkable that despite all the obstacles black people and other people of color have faced just to be recognized as human in this country, they were resilient in their own right. Unlike other races whose journey through life educationally, economically, and just to live, was much less obstructed; they continued to strive to do the best they could so their children, and their children's children could have a better life, and piece of the American dream no matter how many times they had to start from the ground up. For that I am eternally grateful for the rich heritage and struggles of my forefathers and foremothers which allowed me to arrive at the same destination as many others I know without the generational hardships.

After he and my grandmother, Helen migrated to Kansas with their first seven children, Granddaddy built their family home from the ground up out of brick because they had lost a home to a fire back in Oklahoma and didn't want that to happen again. It became a project he would work on and "add on" to for years to come. The city decided to expand the railroads and highways to run right through neighborhood s that displaced many families. A practice that frequently happened in black communities and less than desirable parts of town across the USA. After the homes were torn down and demolished for the new highway system, I was told a story by my aunt Deborah that my grandfather collected as many bricks as he could from the demolished homes to build a second fireplace for the den, a two-car garage, a porch, and a great big barbecue pit. The same pit that we frequently used to have wiener roasts and barbecues with my siblings and cousins spending the night, sleeping outside under the stars. The cities demolition project was definitely Granddaddy's treasure and the bricks were put to very good use! Granddaddy was a devoted husband and family man who dedicated his life to my grandmother Helen (Roberson). To this union was born 12 children in which Shirley (Sanders) was the first and my mother Joyce (Drake) the second. Being the first two children of my grandparents, there wasn't much time for play as they needed to assist my grandmother taking care of the other ten that continued to come. I loved hearing my mother tell stories of how she and her big sister Shirley would make their own dolls out of empty pop bottles when they could find time to play. They would find material to cover the bottles for dresses and after shucking corn they would save the corn silk for the doll’s hair. Aunt Shirley told me they really thought they were fancy when they used untwined pieces of rope for their doll's hair because it was easier to work with!

Mother was somewhat of a Daddy’s girl; taking every opportunity to sneak outside to work alongside my grandfather in the hot Kansas sun or the even hotter kitchen baking pies, cakes and other pastries. Mother told us she cherished every moment in presence of her father. Before her death in 2012, she often reminisced about the many life lessons he taught her and the times she and her siblings spent with him. When he wasn’t laying bricks, Granddaddy would travel to other towns for temporary construction jobs. He also ran a countryside restaurant with his younger brother. According to my mother and Aunt Shirley, who were said to be "partners in crime," Granddaddy baked delicious, mouthwatering dinner rolls, assorted cakes and other tasty pies. His specialty was a beautiful Lemon Meringue pie that would be piled high on top of the filling!

This skill was acquired at that same restaurant and tried out on his family every Saturday night to go with the after-church family dinners. My mother claimed his excellent baking skills were comparable to any famous, modern day *Pastry Chef* on today's cable TV. We would spend many a Sunday afternoon, laughing and having fun around the dinner table each day. I definitely attribute my work ethic to my mother who saw our home as a ripe training ground to build character, and work ethic. Traits that would eventually give us skills in emotional intelligence, as well as mental & intestinal fortitude when facing adverse situations and overbearing conditions. There was also an emphasis to get along well with others and a team-work approach for success. This early home training would translate (in all my siblings), skillsets that would carry over into other aspects of our lives. I believe it provided us with knowledge, abilities, and experiences that we now carry with us through life. I also attribute my relationship with God, my gift of service and my love for mankind to a life of church activities, and many other people outside of my mother's influence. Participation in the children's and young adult choirs, youth group activities, pastors, youth group leaders and all the mentors and spiritual leaders that were part of my life. They played a role in my spiritual development.

My father was a tall, handsome man with a big smile. A navy man who loved people and made sure we were surrounded with the love of family. While in the US Navy, his deepest desire was to do what not many blacks were able to do in the Midwest in the 1960s. He wanted to attend Wichita State University to fulfill his dream of becoming a businessman. His Uncle William Davidson was a successful man in the community who owned a car dealership to which my father aspired to be just like him. He could hardly wait to get out of the military so he could use the programs created for military veterans after the G.I. bill expired. These programs allowed him to take a few classes at Wichita State University but unfortunately, after marrying and having back to back children, he was not able to continue his education. That dream was deferred to provide for his young family. Along with my parents and Viveca, my nuclear family included my brother Donald Jr. who was right smack in the middle between us two older and my two younger sisters, Alaina and Adrienne. I was about five years old when my youngest sister was born, whom I saw as my real live doll. To this day, I can remember us going with my father to drop off my mother at the hospital and her coming home a few days later with a real live baby doll. Other than my baby doll, my siblings were all very close in age. In fact, I am two and 1/2 years younger than my oldest sister wish us "middle three”, all born a year apart in 1962, 1963 and 1964. Coincidentally, my brother and sister share the same birthday, September 30th. They are a year apart with my birthday coming a few days later on October 2nd.

One of my fondest memories as far back as I can recall, is my mother who was as tired as she was from trying to keep my father happy, keep up an immaculate home, keep her kids clean and well nurtured, and find a way to keep up with our birthdays, she did a good job at least with us middle three by making each of us our very own individual birthday cake. She must've grown weary over the years because I don't remember having the three cakes once we hit our teenage years. Our sister Viveca, whom we've always seen as an extension of our mother, made sure the tradition continued when we all met in Wichita for a funeral in 2018. During that weekend, we turned 56, 55 and 54 years old. My paternal grandmother was the epitome of kindness, which was lavished upon us as kids and followed throughout our lives. My father made sure we had close bonds with my grandmother Velma, my Aunt Barbara and my father's other siblings who were more like cousins to us than aged Aunts. With that said, the rest of our time was spent visiting with relatives on my father's side of the family. I still miss my paternal grandmother more than words can describe. Fortunately, I am able to continue to experience her vicariously through my Aunt Barbara. She is a constant reminder of who I am becoming and what I'll be at her age. I also attribute my fun-loving, compassionate and empathetic spirit to both my Aunt Shirley and Aunt Barbara's careers in nursing, and the love and affection of both my grandmother's.

In 1966 my parents were faced with the challenge of learning some news that could've changed the course of my family's life had they not been strong, resilient people. They had already seen plenty of adversity in their lives and would not be hindered by the vicissitudes of life. In 1966, at the age of two, my parents began to grow concerned that my sister, Alaina was not responding appropriately to her name being called or sounds that would normally startle a young toddler. I still have vivid memories as a four-year old when my parents took out all the pots, pans and long handled utensils to bang them together making as much noise as we could. They placed her on the floor facing them, with her back to us as we went to town making the loudest racket without even a flinch from my sister. I saw their hearts sink as their suspicions of her deafness were realized. After Alaina was taken to a hearing specialist, we learned that a nationwide Rubella epidemic during the first six months of 1964 had affected 6,000 pregnancies. Apparently, my mother was impregnated in January of 1964 but unaware of the potential effects on her developing fetus. After all, she lived in Kansas, and was not afforded all the medical treatment, testing, research and resources afforded to other pregnant women across the country.

By the grace of God, my sister only had moderate hearing loss and was labeled Hard of Hearing*.* During that epidemic, there were thousands of babies born with severe birth defects, cerebral palsy, deafness, blindness, and combinations of multiple conditions. This created the need for more schools for the blind and deaf as well as institutions that took in children whose parents were unable to care for them. There were thousands of miscarriages and many babies born who did not survive long past birth.

My mother was a very strong-willed woman who told me that when she was a young girl, there was a family in the neighborhood near Kansas Avenue that had a deaf child. They rarely saw this particular child because she was sent to live at a school for the deaf in a neighboring city. My mother reflected on that memory and communicated the sorrow she felt for the child when they visited their home. The child stayed in her room and only came out to get food, heading right back to her room without socializing because no one in the family or neighborhood knew sign language. Without a doubt, it was for that reason that my mother vowed that she would never have her Alaina shipped off to live at a deaf school. She raised her daughter to be strong and never use the impediment as an excuse to be separated from us or as an excuse to fail. She was eventually able to obtain support and guidance from a friend, who directed her to the John Tracy Clinic. There, she was provided with resources, educational information and referrals for the needed support to raise a deaf child. My mother's shared experience was also the impetus that made my father learn sign language. He was unskilled and not adequately trained but he purchased several sign language books and would attempt to teach us ASL every Sunday evening at home in our “family” sign language classes so we could maintain some form of communication with my sister.

*Riverside*

It was only a few years later that my parents would eventually get the opportunity of a lifetime. My father was offered a job transfer to Riverside, California to work as a Tool & Die Maker for General Electric Company in Ontario, California. Not long after accepting the job offer, they packed up their five kids and our household to make the journey to California. After a 3-day road trip we arrived in Riverside where my parents would make a new life for our family. I was approaching my 8th birthday. Back then, Riverside was a small city that had fewer homes and lots of land.The population has quadrupled since we arrived in 1969. There were lots of orange groves and we couldn't believe how tall the palm trees were that we only saw on TV. My family was mesmerized by the vast, open fields of land. We were awed that we could just pull over to the side of the road and eat as many oranges as our hearts desired.

We also took family trips to the beach and Disneyland. Coming from Kansas we thought we were experiencing heaven on earth. Riverside would eventually become our field of dreams. My parents soon became homeowners in a nice, middle-class, white neighborhood. The people were friendly and I personally never experienced racism on any level. The story was different for my parents who lived and worked in the real world. Mother was a homemaker and a strict disciplinarian but as we grew older, she took a job at Stator Brother's grocery store to help make ends meet. Although she made sure our home was full of love, fun, and happiness, the weekends consisted of not only what was then seen as typical "women’s work" but also an opportunity to make sure our yard was always the nicest on the block. My siblings and I definitely did more than our share of outside chores no matter how young or old we were. Mother was an equal opportunitytask masterwho believed work should be distributed in an age appropriate manner. Whether one was 14 like her oldest daughter, or 5 like her youngest, there was some form of work for each of us! She was not overly affectionate but we felt loved and were treated well. I truly believe her affinity to hard work was a balance of necessity and a coping mechanism for some of the discontent life handed her. But for us, it truly became a valuable keystone in our lives. I believe this is why her children obtained success on many levels. We all graduated from college. My oldest sister Viveca is a professional artist who devoted her life to her military husband (my wonderful brother in law) and their children. She saw something special in her children and spent years as a homemaker and homeschool mom encouraging them in the arts and theatre. Her hard work paid off as my nephew Jeryn enjoyed a career during his teenage years in Hollywood as a Disney Movie Surfer, and my niece Tristin, is a cast member on the CBS TV show MacGyver. My brother Donald once worked for Smith-Barney after passing the Series 7 exam licensing him to sell securities. He later chose a career in real estate and insurance sales because as the only black, working alongside the only woman in the firm, he didn’t want to be complicit in the “good old Boys” environment they were subjected to. His only child Jelani followed in my footsteps, recently earning a Master of Science degree in athletic training and now works in an industrial setting. My sister Alaina is one of only a few black deaf people who has earned a master’s degree. She now works as an occupational counselor in NYC. Lastly, my youngest sister (that baby doll I loved to play with) earned a master’s degree over 10 years ago in Occupational Therapy. She practices OT and is a business owner in Arizona. Then there's me.

Beginning with our move to Riverside and over the next several years, my father made sure we took swimming lessons every summer at the local neighborhood park. He took pride in becoming a great swimmer during his early years in the navy. He always thought I was the best swimmer in the bunch and told me I had what it took to be a compete. After elementary school I attended Chemawa Middle School which is quite a blur. My only real memories of 7th and 8th grade was playing on the intramural basketball team, my Health/P.E. teacher Mrs. Ensero, and working for Mr. Sartoris, the Special Ed. Teacher. I helped him care for developmentally challenged and mentally disabled children. At that time, I thought I wanted to be a nurse or work with disabled kids when I grew up. I later realized that I didn't want to take care of sick people and both fields require a special gift in caring for this population.

Us older siblings first went Ramona High School where only Viveca would attend all four years. I felt bad for my sister Viv because she liked sports and wanted to try out for the basketball team but Mother needed her at home to help with us. As unfair as it was, I was able to join the varsity teams in both my freshman and sophomore years. I was somewhat of a "square" but I hung out with a crew who regularly ditched class and did bad things at the park. I was a regular teenager who seemed to be popular. In fact, the goal of many of my friend's was to get me to smoke "herb" with them. They thought if I was funny without it, I would be hilarious under the influence! I was my own person who never succumbed to peer pressure. I never ditched a single class in all my four years of high school and was regarded as a good friend and a peace maker.

Over the next seven years my parents relocated to a third community in Riverside about a 1/2 mile from the California School for the Deaf Riverside (CSDR). As my sister grew older, so grew her need to be more academically challenged; which could only be provided through deaf education. My mother's anxious heart was finally calmed because CSDR was only a hop, skip, and a jump from our new home which allowed my sister to remain with our family. The only other school for the deaf in California was up in northern California in the city of Fremont. At the time of my father's transfer from Kansas to Riverside, they hadn't even heard of CSDR. It was only by the grace of God that we ended up down the street from CSDR! We finally found our permanent home that was suitable for my sisters needs and large enough to accommodate our large family.

My faith journey really started between my sophomore and junior year of high school. At the age of 15, I gained 40 pounds during the first two months of summer. I had these galloping symptoms of falling asleep every time I sat down, having the shakes while my eyes and neck began to bulge. Although my mother noticed these things, she just thought they were growing pains. It really caught her attention when I told that my menstrual cycle had stopped. Of course, in her mind, there was only one reason for that. After her inquisition, she believed me that I never even kissed a boy before (well, except maybe one time at the park). Somewhat alarmed, she took me straight to the doctor for a check-up. The pregnancy test came back as expected but the doctor was unsure of why I had all the multiple signs and symptoms. I was referred to an Endocrinologist who was equally perplexed. Next came a trip to the nuclear medicine department where I was diagnosed with a thyroid disorder. I was an enigma, the endocrinologist said I was the first person he and his colleagues had seen with both active Grave's Disease and hypothyroidism simultaneously! They told my mother I would've have likely died had this gone on for six more weeks. For a 15-year-old, that was scary news. To make matters worse during that visit, I was given a life-sentence of taking twelve little pills every day for the rest of my life. The medication, Propylthiouracil is a name has been etched in my mind for eternity.

I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior in my late teens and I believe the bible to be true. I had heard countless times, that *faith* came by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. I believed in God and stood on the promises that God had the power to heal even me. I will never forget my mother 's reaction when I told her that six months after my diagnosis, I had stopped taking the thyroid meds. One day during church there was an altar call for people needing prayer who were suffering from various afflictions and distress. Even though I was only around 16, while everyone else was well beyond my years, I still found the courage to stand up. This single act would change my life forever. It gave me courage, strength and faith in God that I would call upon throughout my career. After church, I went home and flushed my pills down the toilet. Over the next six months I carefully watched for the signs and symptoms to return but by the grace of God, they never did! Once I felt I was in the clear, I garnered the courage to tell my mother what I had done. She looked at me with her eyes bucked out and said you did what? Then to my surprise, in a calm manner, she told me that if I felt the Lord led me to do that, then she was ok with it. We never spoke another word about it, and she continued to take me to my yearly endocrinology follow-ups which always came back with my TSH levels within normal limits.

My two years at Riverside Poly were just like Ramona, I did not ditch class or hang out much with other kids, other than those in my church youth groups. My free time was spent playing board games with my family, watching way too much TV and running up and down the street with my siblings and our young adult neighbor, Carleton Reed. Carleton was an important factor in our lives as he taught us many other things our parents couldn't. He got us into jazz and taught us how to play chess. He was our adviser on many issues of life though he was only a young man himself who was married and the father of two baby boys. It’s true that it takes a village to raise a child. I spent many days in the home of Carleton and Joyce Reed who eventually stood in the gap as our Aunt and Uncle since ours where in Kansas, and I became their babysitter. They were an important part of my village.

I did not swim competitively in high school, like my father would've loved but I did take swim classes. I was no Sippy Woodhead, (the Olympic medalist, out of Riverside Poly, who won three gold medals at the World Championships at age 14) but I enjoyed recreational swimming into my adult years. I would still occasionally fall asleep in class and soon got tagged with the nickname, Sleepy. I'm not sure if it was my medical condition or just the boredom over the subject matter that made me nod off. I joined the varsity basketball team which was on an entirely different level from the team I played on before. Being two years older, I was proudly on the team with the great Cheryl Miller for two years. We won CIF titles my Jr and Sr seasons. In fact, one of the highlights of my entire high school years was the night we got to meet Magic Johnson after winning the CIF title. After the team photo, we all lined up as he shook our hands and planted a kiss on each of our cheeks. One of my teammates and I, Meg Gallagher (Sanders), whose parents were both deaf and came to every game, vowed that we would never wash our faces again! Cheryl would eventually lead Poly to four back to back CIF Championships!

I was mesmerized by the things Cheryl would do on the court. In my book, she is the best women's basketball player in the history of the game. It was during my time on the basketball team at Poly that I got a foretaste of my future. Not in the form of a competitive athlete like Cheryl who razzled and dazzled audiences in every venue but in the form of being a health care professional as an athletic trainer. I graduated from HS forty years ago before sports medicine was the widely impacted and rewarding profession that it is today. I don't recall too many injuries other than a few sprained ankles or the time Cheryl slid across the floor for a loose ball and busted her chin wide open. In fact, I never heard of a certified athletic trainer nor was I familiar with what they did or how to become one. It was Mr. Miller who took care of us and who was the first person I had ever seen tape an ankle back in 1979. Although I did find it fascinating, my interest didn't go any further other than seeing this technique as just another of the Miller family's many talents!

I played on the team and got along well with everyone but there was an inner struggle to lose the weight I had gained two summers prior and I was still falling asleep going into my senior year. To make matters worse, I had no clue what I wanted to do with my life and the clock was ticking towards graduation. My only ambition was to get married and have ten kids. After being raised in a family with four girls, I figured the more boys the better as they seemed easier to manage. By the time I was a senior, I had all ten of their names picked out! Truth be told, I played more of a supportive role on the team and was quite satisfied with being part of a great program alongside teammates who had promising futures. Many went on to play D1 basketball and really made a name for themselves in various professions.

My father was a nice man that made sure he attended all of our sporting events. He took us Lake Perris for night fishing and sightseeing to the Grand Canyon and Utah. We made plenty of road trips back to Kansas that kept us close to our roots and relatives. He encouraged the entrepreneurial spirit by ultimately leaving his job at GE to open Bill Used Cars where we all pitched in to help. But he most valued a college education for us that he so desperately wanted for himself. As a result, he was old-school and gave all of us the same ultimatum after we graduated from high school get a job, go to college or get out! More than likely, he probably threatened us with being kicked out just to spark a fire. However, in my case, it was the drive I needed to the laissez-faire approach I had to life. I had not earned a scholarship like many others on the team, nor was I adequately prepared to transfer to a four-year university. I chose my father's second option and quickly enrolled at Riverside Community College. It was then that I fell in love with bike riding around the city of Riverside and Mt. Rubidoux. I also started losing weight and feeling better about myself.

My first year at Riverside City College was perfunctory at best. I was only enrolled in college because I felt I had no other choice. I pretty much hung out in the quad, wasting a lot of time and taking classes with no purpose, guidance or direction. I may not have been directed but I was still a nice girl that didn’t get into trouble. One day, a friend of mine who was on the Poly basketball team with me asked me to play basketball. I didn't have anything else to do, so I agreed to play. Instead of the pick-up game I thought we would be going to, she actually tricked me into showing up for a tryout for the RCC women's team of which her father was the president! I was pretty easy going, so she laughed when I made the team. It was par for the course and nothing more than a continuation of the same attitude I had in high school. Just something to keep me busy. My second year on the basketball team changed my whole outlook on life. I finally had the drive, purpose and passion I needed for a successful career in doing what I would love for many years to come.

It started at a practice when I severely sprained my ankle and was transported to the athletic training facility on campus. An older gentleman named Al Boyd evaluated my injury and gave me a treatment plan. It didn't take more than that visit for the light to come on in my head and my eyes to be wide open! I had found my destiny! After Al got me back on my feet, I had missed too many games to continue, so I asked Al if I could help him with the athletes. He told me that he could use the help and I would be called a “Student-trainer." This was a name that is frowned upon today in our profession because the name "trainer" is widely used across many professions and does not identify our role in health care. The correct term is “Athletic Trainer.” The next year, Al took me under his wing and made it his mission to introduce me to many, many athletic trainers. Some certified and others that were "grandfathered" into their jobs from working in the field for years. It was because of Al that I met so many influential athletic trainers. It was so long ago I cannot even remember all of their names. Thanks to Al Boyd, when I was only 19 years of age, I met my fair share of pioneers like Gale Weldon who was the second woman to join the NATA and in the first group of females to become certified. We met at a track meet. She let me shadow her daily for the duration of the event. To me, she was nothing less than smart, strong, thoughtful, and kind. Gale made me proud to have the opportunity to follow along the journey she helped pave for me.

**California State University, Long Beach**

Thirty-eight years ago, in the summer of 1982, just before my 21st birthday, I left home for the first time transferring to a four-year college. My first athletic training mentor, Al Boyd, advised me to apply to California State University, Long Beach because it was a good school and the athletic training program was among the best of the local universities. It also cost less being a part of the state university system. It was less than 60 miles from home but Al was right in the sense that CSULB was far enough away to feel like I was really "away" for college but close enough to retain the security of home. In late July I attended a mandatory orientation meeting at a nice home where I met the athletic training staff and the other student athletic trainers for the upcoming season/school year. The head athletic trainer was Dan Bailey, who was a certified athletic trainer and licensed physical therapist. Dan was a burly "corn fed" looking dude from Utah with a strong presence and mildly intimidating demeanor. He was a man of few words who generally had a big wad of chewing tobacco between his cheek and gums. I was quite comfortable with his no nonsense, yet hospitable style as I saw many of my relatives in him. Dan seemed delighted to introduce us to his wife Kay and their three kids who were often found running around the training room. Dan had the physical build of an ex-football player but was truly a gentle giant. He took a liking to me even letting me stay with him and his family until my apartment was ready.

Although it seemed more like a directive than an invitation, I was grateful for the gesture and opportunity to participate in the upcoming pre-season football practices. I have fond memories of the kindness and hospitality the Bailey’s extended to me. I had a great time living with them for those 3 weeks and eventually became their primary babysitter, which is a whole other story! Like their dad, the Bailey kids were big and rambunctious. It was not uncommon to be "smashed between the two boys" while chasing them around the house trying to break up their fights. They had one daughter that I would team up with to beat the boys in basketball and send them whimpering to their rooms! We still laugh about those days when I have the chance to spend time with Kay and her children. All three of the Bailey kids were big for their ages and quite athletic. Their youngest son, Ryan, grew up to become an intercollegiate water polo player and Olympian, Dan eventually served on the USA Olympic Water Polo medical staff. They continue to be special to me and were extremely devoted to their parents. Sadly, we lost Dan unexpectedly after a 35 year stellar career at CSULB. He passed only a few years after his retirement during a knee surgery to repair an old college football injury.

Dan always found odd jobs for me to make a few bucks on the side. It was often extra babysitting jobs for the Bailey’s or their close friends. I also was the keeper of boxes of heel and lace pads in my apartment. My job was to apply lube between two rectangular felt pads, like a sandwich. Before taping an ankle, the taper would put one lubed pad in front of the ankle and one over the Achilles tendon. The pads would then slide between the skin and the tape to avoid cuts and blisters. I was told that Dan invented the heel and lace pad, a product that is still a staple in every training room and one that revolutionized athletic taping.

Those odd jobs truly helped keep a little change in my pocket but maybe more importantly I established myself as the one they could count on. I made myself available for the "less desirable" road trips and was there to pinch-hit whenever needed. Between that and my own responsibilities, they viewed me as dependable, trustworthy, and reliable. I was a dedicated student athletic trainer who saw my opportunity to work with CSULB as a privilege and an honor. There was no financial remuneration. The "pay" came by way of "experience," I learned a long time ago that, "when learning a new craft, experience can be more precious than gold!"

It didn't take long for me to figure out why "double-day" practices were referred to as "Hell-Week." Traditionally, the athletic training staff is the first to arrive and the last to leave. It’s a grueling 12-hour workday, 7 days a week for two consecutive weeks. It’s NOT for the faint of heart! The work ethic my parents instilled in me along with my experience at Riverside, prepared me for the demands I faced at Long Beach State. I was accustomed to working hard and cherished athletic training as my new-found passion. I enjoyed every minute and absorbed everything I could from two of the best in both Dan Bailey, and Keith Freeseman. The hours were long and the work was plentiful. In fact, today's accreditation standards suggest we refrain from using the term "work" in our clinical settings. Times have changed because it sure felt like work to me. A labor of love but it was work.

I lived and breathed athletic training and dreamed of one day being certified! Dan and Keith were very dedicated to pouring themselves into their students with the hopes of making us great! The major difference between my internship at Riverside vs CSULB, was there wasn’t any academic coursework in athletic training at Riverside. During the first week of classes, I was intrigued by Keith's knowledge of the subject and I became infatuated with the textbook---"Modern Principles of Athletic Training: A Competency Based Approach" by Dr. Daniel Arnheim and Dr. William Prentice. Keith said it was known as "The Bible of Athletic Training" and used in Kinesiology departments across the country. It was the 6th edition and for only $23.00 it contained a treasure trove of information that I longed for.

"Prevention and Treatment of Athletic Injuries" is generally the very first athletic training course a student athletic trainer takes. I was driven with the anticipation and excitement that I would finally get to learn the practical application and technical science of injury care and management, the type of information I craved during my time at Riverside. When I became a certified athletic trainer and taught at the college level, I continued to use the same textbook now in its 17th edition. Unfortunately, I missed Dr. Arnheim as a professor by one semester. He was on sabbatical and had returned to teach at San Diego State University. A few years later, in honor of Dr. Arnheim's death, Dr. Prentice renamed the book: "Arnheim's Principles of Athletic Training: An Evidence Based Approach." Fast-forward 15 years later, I had the honor of being on the front cover of the 13th edition along with my esteemed colleague Dr. Ethan Krieswirth. I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Prentice and have autograph that cover which is one of my prized possessions.

Keith made up for Dr. Arnheim's absence by being a great professor who taught me so much and gave me the foundation for my competence in the field. Along with Keith's athletic training classes, I also loved another professor named Dr. Bill Husak. He made it fun to be a physical educator and through him I realized that I was on the right path. I broadly consider myself to be a physical educator first, then a healthcare and fitness professional. The love for physical education I inherited from Dr. Husak and the other physical educators from CSULB, inspired me over the years to pursue various certifications that enhanced my level of knowledge in the multidisciplinary approaches to sports medicine. My favorites being those certifications recently obtained as a Fitness Nutrition Specialist, and Certified Nutrition Coach.

Moving into my apartment was sort of a blur. All I can remember was my mother dropping me off and helping me settle in. Fortunately, I ran into an old high school acquaintance who was looking for a roommate, so things were really working out for my transition. My mother didn't give me any advice or parting words of wisdom, so we didn't have much conversation. The only thing I remember about that day, was her gifting me with a small bible that was engraved with my name. It had a nice inscription penned in her unique handwriting which read: "Hide God's Word in your heart as you travel this journey called life."I suppose she knew times would get hard and I would need this reminder to hold on to God's unchanging hand. As a person who collects old relics and things of sentimental value, it pained me when that bible was lost in one of my many moves.

My parents made a commitment that they would do what they could so I would not have to find a job while in college. It wasn't quite enough and I often struggled financially. I owe a lot to a longtime high school friend from Riverside Poly, Angie Ward (Grady), who travelled a similar path as me. After we both graduated from Poly, we attended RCC and later transferred to CSULB where she landed a job in the bookstore. I’m sure she hated to see me coming to borrow a few bucks for food or gas money to get home but she never denied me and we remain friends till this day. Angie was truly a lifesaver.

My parents were in the position where they made too much for me to qualify for financial aid but not enough to provide other things beyond housing and tuition. Nonetheless, it was a great feat for a young couple with five kids from the small town of Wichita, Kansas. I was extremely proud and grateful for what they provided and did my best to not ask for anything extra. Although, there was that time I asked for a new bicycle. My old Schwinn was outdated and hard to ride. My father finally acquiesced to my begging and pleading and I soon had a new bike. I proudly rode back and forth from home to school and all-over Long Beach! Looking back, those were times I will never forget. In those times of struggle, I learned the meaning of grit and I fully appreciated all the sacrifices my parents made to put me through college.

Keith Freeseman was Dan's assistant athletic trainer. He was a younger man that moved in a more much energetic and fast paced fashion than Dan. It was obvious that Keith, (now Dr. Freeseman), had a lot of responsibility and was committed to running a tight ship. Along with Keith there was Gennie Strauss, a petite, Asian American woman who ran the women's athletic training facility on the other side of the building. She was a great role model and was always open to lending an ear. When the issues of life got really hard for me, Gennie never hesitated to take the time to offer me wise counsel.

There was not always a women's athletic training facility. Beverly Sweet was one of CSULB's first female athletic training students, 10 years before I arrived. Bev was certainly an early pioneer in the field who paved the way for women like me. In recent years before she retired, we were at the District 8 "Far West Athletic Trainers Symposium" in Las Vegas (FWATA) swapping stories. I told her how it felt to be one of only a hand full of black athletic trainers attending these conferences in the old days. She shared how hard she had it back in the 70's. She told me that she approached Dr. Dan Arnheim and asked if she could be a student athletic trainer. She said he was quite agreeable to her request and assigned her to work under the supervision of another "student trainer" who would later be her roommate. They were only allowed to work with the women's sports teams in a makeshift AT facility that was renovated from a kitchen next to the old gym. She said they had a small space, with limited supplies and no real supervision. As time passed, she contacted an athletic trainer at one of the Orange County community colleges, which began her journey into the profession. I owe much to pioneers like Beverly who I knew up close and personal, and others like Julie Max one of the NATA's female presidents I followed from afar.

This was a few years before Title IX: the civil rights law passed in 1972 as part of the education act. This was the genesis of many women's athletic training facilities and the desegregation of men's only facilities across the country. This eventually led to CSULB having two facilities. When I came along, the "training rooms" were still separated by gender-based sports but female student athletic trainers were allowed to work in the men's facility alongside their male counterparts. I am extremely grateful for the day Beverly Sweet shared that part of her story with me. We had known one another for at least 30 years prior to that chance conversation but I never realized what a true pioneer she was. She helped "chart the course" for so many female certified athletic trainers that came through Long Beach State and later at Cerritos Community College where she enjoyed a long career before retiring.

Throughout my time at CSULB, I developed some very close relationships. I was especially close to another young lady who was also black, Katrina Harris (Session). Katrina was concurrently enrolled in the CSULB physical therapy program and was highly respected for that achievement. I'm sure Katrina met a lot of "first" such as being the first black ATC/PT in California, if not the nation! There were only a few black physical therapists in the 70s, so I was not exposed to the profession at an early age. However, I was actually mentored by a black female PT, name Joy Hassen when I was between ages 11-15. It was more of a "spiritual" mentorship as she was one of the girls' youth leaders at Second Baptist, my family's first church back in Riverside.

I guess we didn't talk much about careers or professions because for all the time we spent together I never knew she was a PT until well after I graduated from college. As the only blacks in the program, Katrina and I were good friends surviving the arduous demands of working in the athletic training facility. Our friendship was based on a shared faith and the support that we offered one another. We were two peas in a pod. I will never forget the time we garnered the strength and courage to knock on Dan's office door to express a concern we shared. During football practices and games, athletic training students were not allowed to run on the field with the certified athletic trainers to tend to an injury. That job was reserved for Dan and Keith along with the attending physicians. Katrina and I were concerned with how we could learn if we could not observe. We had questions. What was going on as they huddled over the injured athlete? What were they saying? What was his disposition like? What special test were performed? We wanted to know the details up close and personal. We thought it was high time to change the rules!

We were surprised at how receptive Dan was when we asked. We told Dan our concern was that even though we were learning a lot from textbooks, we needed more practical experience. We wanted to see how it translated in real life. Dan agreed that we could gain much more with that level of involvement and spoke to Keith on our behalf. Katrina and I looked at each other in shock and left his office before he could change his mind. The next practices and game-days were much more fulfilling. We were allowed to form a buddy system with the others assigned to football and given other responsibilities other than fetching emergency equipment and hydration duties. We were finally a part of the on-field, injury care and management team! We followed the directives of Dan and Keith up close and personal and learned so much more due to this new system. We counted that simple act of boldness critically important for ourselves and the student athletic trainers that would come after us.

Even though I loved attending college in Long Beach, my heart was always drawn towards home. Although I was glad to finally be on my own, I found myself heading back to Riverside more than I ever thought I would. I actually lived for the weekends and looked forward to familiar ground. As their first child to "go off" to college, my parents were truly proud of me and tried to support me as much as they knew how. My father would always greet me with a great big smile and his arms stretched wide. He would always say "W-i-l-l-d-a!," which made me feel so warm inside! My mother appeared to be equally as happy to see me and would listen to my stories about college life. When it was time to go, she would also let me shop freely from their panty cabinets and freezer to stock up on all the toiletries and groceries. I even remember one weekend racing home to tell my mother that I had found my purpose in life! My mission would be to share the love of Jesus Christ with the athletes I would serve over the course of my career! In her usual matter-of-fact manner, Mother nodded her head in approval, gave a slight smile and told me that if I felt the Lord was leading me in that direction, she was happy for me. I always looked forward to going home, as it was a nice "timeout" from the rigors of student life at CSULB.

Home was always a soft, landing pad, especially during times of my greatest disappointments. Disappointments that I later realized were "tests" and "life lessons" that would make me strong. One such disappointment came in the summer of 1984. Athletic training staffs across the country were invited to participate in the XXIII Olympic games as medical volunteers. Since the Olympics were in LA and many of the water sports were in Long Beach, I was assigned to sailing and yachting. The hours were long but not nearly as arduous as I was accustomed to. I met a lot of great people, including a physician who hosted a luncheon out on his yacht. Unfortunately, in my naïveté, I also had the scare of my life. I accepted an invitation from a Pakistani athlete to go on a sailing trip one afternoon. We were far out enough that I could no longer see the shore. The boat was sitting in idle and a sense of uneasiness came over me. I realized he had other things in mind after refusing his advances and asking him to take me back. He finally complied and returned me safely to the dock. This was my first lesson in the consequences of fraternizing with athletes. A lesson I carried with me throughout the rest of my career.

After the Olympic games were over, we learned there going to be a surplus of funds left over after everything was reconciled by the USA Olympic committee. A few weeks later, as the CSULB staff and my fellow AT student's checks started rolling in, I would ride my bike home every day as fast as I could to check my mailbox. It was always empty but each day I would go to the training room to hear of yet another person's excitement after receiving their check. I always celebrated along with them looking forward to my payday. After about a month, I was the only one including the certified athletic trainers that didn't get paid and we all realized that my check wasn't coming. After calls were made to the appropriate Olympic administrators, Gennie informed me that the disbursements were random and the funds had been exhausted. I was completely devastated. I felt that of all the athletic training students, I was deserving of this bonus because of all the hard work and dedication I had put into "all things CSULB athletic training."

Shortly after that when my time was winding down and it was time for me to find a career job, I applied for a job at a renowned sports medicine/physical therapy clinic called "Kerlan & Jobe Orthopedics.” Their patients were primarily high-profile university and professional athletes because of the reputations of their world-renowned orthopedic surgeons. It seemed that the interview went well and my hiring sounded very promising. I was all but assured I was going to be their first athletic trainer! I was making all sorts of plans to begin my career in the clinical setting and told my father the job was as good as mine. Until I received the dreadful call that in fact, I did not get the job. I realized the expression was true: If you want to make God laugh, then tell Him your plans! I was profoundly disappointed because it was past time to relieve my parents of me as a financial burden. In fact, about a year prior, I was in very low spirits. I told my mother I was going to quit school and just "get a job" because I knew they were stretched to the limit. Of course, my mother told me that I was not going to quit and they would continue to do what they could: I just needed to keep the faith. After a short-lived pity party, I heeded my mother's advice and reminded myself that God is in control and truly knew what was best for me. I continued to put my best foot forward, believing there was something better for me. Sure enough, better was coming!

Soon after, in my last semester at CSULB, one of my classmates, Jamie, needed a sub at a PT clinic in Palos Verdes. He was a physical therapy aid but also worked as medic at a local resort. Jaime asked me if I could cover his weekend shifts. I was strapped for cash and jumped at the chance. Dan Bailey owned a PT clinic close to the university where we were allowed to sharpen our clinical skills in a physical therapy setting. This gave me the confidence to take Jaime up on his offer. It was at this clinic that I met the owner, Dennis Phelps who was a certified athletic trainer. Dennis was not a PT and I don't know the scale or magnitude of the situation but it appeared that many other professionals were not happy with an athletic trainer owning a PT clinic. The clinic was operated by a very smart physical therapist named Mike Fishvogt and his wife. He taught me a great deal about physical therapy, rehab and how different it was to work in the PT setting. I had graduated and God opened a door for me to be hired in Jaime's place. In addition to Dennis Phelps being the owner of this PT clinic, he was the head athletic trainer at Cal. State University, Dominguez Hills. After working at his clinic for eight months, Dennis made me an offer I could not refuse! I was less than a year out of college and not yet certified but already in a great position for a career job! In fact, I was the first among my peers at CSULB to gain employment as an athletic trainer! In retrospect and the providence of God, I saw it as "the check" I had missed out on from the Los Angeles Olympic Games and would be my check for years to come!

I was introduced to "someone" who knew "someone" who helped me get hired for the Los Angeles Summer Pro League try-out camp. The camp was held in LA for years before moving to the Long Beach Pyramid. I soon discovered that I was the only female who worked the tryouts for young men trying to make a summer league team. NBA rookies, returners and free agents played to stay fit and show case their talent. Some were there for a chance to fill out a NBA roster. Once again, in the sovereignty of God, in the summer of 1985 I was introduced to Larry Creger, the owner of the LA Summer Pro League. Larry was a man I could tell was important by the way people acted around him. Mr. Creger was the brain behind the first ever Summer Pro Basketball League in 1970. He was a "visionary" who as its first and only owner until he sold it in the early1990’s. Mr. Creger was also known around the league for coaching for the LA Lakers and Cleveland Cavaliers as well as his affiliation with other NBA team front offices.

One day, Mr. Creger questioned me about my background and future goals. This was not long after yet another road trip home where I enthusiastically told my mother that I wanted to be the first female athletic trainer in the NBA! I also shared this dream with Mr. Creger and he seemed open to this being a future possibility. He told me that he had been watching me from a distance for some time and thought I worked hard, carried myself in a professional manner and had established boundaries in regard to how I interacted with the players and young coaches. He went on to tell me that this was very important for women in a male dominated workplace. A lesson I always knew but really took to heart after my experience on that Pakistan sailboat at sea.

He encouraged me to pursue my dream and said that with continued hard work, I had the tools to break through the proverbial "glass ceiling" when the time was right. He then offered me what I considered a promotion. I finally got the opportunity to join the Summer Pro League staff at Loyola Marymount University with what I called "The Big Dogs!" Not only was my goal to be the first female athletic trainer in the league, I would inherently become the first "black" athletic trainer in the NBA. To that end, I put my best foot forward and hit the road running to blaze my trail. I saw this as an opportunity to grow in my professional development as a young athletic trainer.

Thanks to Mr. Creger's stamp of approval, I too had a vision! At the LMU site, I worked alongside NBA and division 1 athletic trainers including Chip Schaffer, Loyola Marymount University's head athletic trainer. Unfortunately, earlier that year, LMU suffered the devastating loss of Hank Gathers, who was sure to be a lottery pick in the NBA draft. I had learned that he and Chip were very close. I felt for Chip, knowing that the death of an athlete is nothing that any of us sign up for. The buzz around the training room that summer was that Chip was in the hunt for the head job for the Chicago Bulls. He worked very hard that summer and I had a lot of respect for him. After spending the summer at LMU and watching his every move. With all due respect, I felt our athletic training skill set was similar, so if he could make it to the professional level, why couldn't I? After going through the tragic death of Hank Gathers, I was truly happy for Chips every move. He earned it and I was glad something good was happening for him to help distract from his grief. Who would have thought Chip would be hired the same season Michael Jordan would win his first of 6 rings.

Chip was always nice to me and never treated me different as a woman in his domain. I was glad to have met him and wished him the best of luck! Ironically, I found out later that Chip Schaffer was the athletic trainer that the Kerlan & Jobe clinic decided to hire which ultimately led to his hiring at LMU. In the end, I was glad to have been beaten out by a guy of such caliber. I landed a great job a few months later that eventually catapulted my career. It became even more clear that when God closes one door, the threshold of another will be ready to cross over; in His time.

The best thing about working the summer pro league that year was building relationships with NBA athletic trainers, especially the older guys who were grandfathered in before the certification exams. That was also the year I met Gary Vitti. He was quite different from the other NBA athletic trainers I had previously met. Gentlemen like Bernie LaReau, a quintessential, somewhat flashy but well-liked older athletic trainer for the Clippers. He was friendly, humble, and kind. He seemingly had no issue with a woman in the "training room." Bernie had a unique swagger about himself, kind of slick, kind of cool. Especially for the older gentlemen that he was. He was never without a gold chain, and big watch! He was the first athletic trainer for the Indiana Pacers and the San Antonio Spurs with vast experiences in pro sports including being the head athletic trainer for the Chicago Bears. I met Bernie around 1987 at LMU after he had recently come on board with the Clippers. I would eventually build a strong rapport with him after the Clippers moved to Los Angeles and started practicing at CSUDH. I was an entry level athletic trainer and looked forward to learning more from Mr. LaReau.

Although our initial meeting was nearly 35 years ago, the one thing that stood out in my mind, was Mr. Vitti did not mind sharing his knowledge with us younger, "wet behind the ear" athletic trainers who aspired to be like him. One day, I remember Mr. Vitti emphatically exclaiming how the field of athletic training needed to conduct more randomized, double blind studies relative to its application to sports medicine. It was so long ago, I can't remember the topic of discussion, but that was the first time I had ever heard a certified athletic trainer so passionate about using the concept of evidence-based practice (EBP) in the athletic training/clinical setting. I was somewhat in awe because Gary sounded like he really believed in what he was teaching us. Because I remember it like it was yesterday, after more than 30 years of teaching Kinesiology, I always start the semester with a brief overview of EBP. A concept that relies on scientific evidence and its importance for health care practitioners. I was very impressed with Gary Vitti, as he seemed to be the "new face" of the NBA. In the years to come, there was an obvious shift in the league as one by one, the old-timers began to retire, only to be replaced by younger and probably more educated certified athletic trainers. I firmly believed that if I continued to work hard and toe the line, there was going to be a place for me.

**California State University, Dominguez Hills**

It was the summer of 1986 when employment opportunities began to materialize for me. In addition to working the summer pro league, I started working part-time at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH). Dennis Phelps was sort of a rugged athletic trainer who wore jeans, cowboy boots and sported a thick handlebar mustache. Dennis was nice and engaging but also loud and aggressive, which I was not used to. By then he had been the head athletic trainer for about 15 years and was only the second athletic trainer in the school's history. Dennis was able to convince the athletic director, Sue Carberry, to divide his full-time job into two part-time positions. He could then bring me in allowing him the freedom to work at his clinic. I shadowed Dennis during the pre-season conditioning for the upcoming fall sports which oriented me to the campus and all aspects of the job.

One ominous day in August I was summoned to the A.D.'s office. Ms. Carberry promptly informed me that I needed to be certified to continue on at the University and she needed to know by the next week. Although I had recently taken the certification exam, I was still waiting for my results. From my mouth to God’s ears I received the good news that I passed the day before the deadline. I was officially hired to work part time as the "Co"-Head Athletic Trainer for the next three years. I call that a "But God" moment, if not for his intervention, that job would have escaped me. I was soon introduced to the student-athletes, coaching and athletic department staff. I was given the keys, a good luck slap on the back and enough rope to jump start me through the week. Dennis was always a phone call away and opened himself to answer any questions I had or help I needed. After all I was a newbie but Dennis trusted that I would do well in a head athletic training position. He recruited and fought for me to get the job and I wasn’t about to let him or myself down. I realized that he gave me the "chance of a lifetime.” I was gainfully employed and the first "black" certified athletic trainer in the "California State University" system. Going on 35 years later and I am the first and since then have been the only black, head athletic trainer in all of the four-year universities in the state of California. I also became one of the youngest head athletic trainers on the university level at 23 years old.

Working part-time at CSUDH also allowed me other means of employment besides the summer pro league. During my time at RCC, Al Boyed encouraged me to volunteer at many elite track and field events, including the Mt. Sac Relays. That is where I had the good fortune to meet Carsandra Taylor and Andy Paulin. I was just a kid at 19 years old but they opened their hearts and minds to me. Andy was a great host and I learned so much from the different sports medicine professionals through that experience. After working six consecutive years as both a student and certified athletic trainer, it all paid off. I was hired as Mt. SACs first "hourly" (now referred to as part-time/per diem) athletic trainer.

At the time I still had limited work experience but they took a chance on me. I was told that my work ethic and aptitude for the job spoke volumes and that was reason they selected me. My responsibilities were to help provide healthcare coverage for a number of sports. I was initially given the responsibility of covering tennis and swimming. My first reaction was almost a sense of guilt. With all the "non-paid" hours I had put in at RCC and CSULB, I couldn't believe they were paying me to cover tennis and water polo! When the check arrived, it didn't take long for that guilt to fade and enjoy the fruits of my labor. I realized that I earned my pay and received it with much gratitude! I enjoyed working alongside Andy and Carsandra. I felt it was a great learning ground for me and I wanted that experience for my students. Over the next ten years I required my CSUDH student athletic trainers to follow in my footsteps and volunteer. It was a great experience and allowed them to network with other health care professionals, eventually creating great opportunities for them as well!

My greatest take away from them was if you work hard, you are reliable and professional you will be noticed. Both retired after over 35 years of service to Mt. Sac. Andy is still an integral part for many of the student athletic trainers. And Carsandra is actively involved with assisting the women's basketball team. They have both contributed to the success of countless professionals who have gone on to work as certified athletic trainers, physical therapists and sports chiropractors. The NATA acknowledges Carsandra Taylor as the 2nd African American female certified athletic trainer. She was also the 1st woman to receive the "NATA 25 years of service" award. To further put her career in perspective, Carsandra was the first black athletic trainer to work in the California Community College System at 23 years old. She was there many years before Andy Paulin joined the Mt. SAC AT staff. For me, Carsandra served as my first female, mentor--a black, female role model was a real inspiration for me. I came along 10 years after she paved the way for me. In her footsteps, I was also among the first 10 African American women certified by the NATA. I will never be able to thank Carsandra enough.

A lot was happening during my early years at CSUDH. The big step was, I got married the year after I was hired in 1987. There was a plethora of opportunities for growth, both professionally and personally. Work and marriage really changed me for the better. I learned to have faith, trust, self-control, patience, strength, and spiritual maturity. All the home training, Christian training, physical education and my athletic training experience were put to the test. I was no longer that passive, easy to control, people pleasing, young woman from Riverside. I was still nice and fun-loving but I became stronger, more assertive, and quite outspoken. This newfound strength was especially manifested when it came to advocate for the health and safety of my student-athletes.

As a woman in the shadow of a male dominated arena, there were many times I had to stand up to the coaches (male and female) who could be intense and intimidating, especially for an entry level athletic trainer. I was not used to interfacing with coaches and administrators on a daily basis. Conflict over decisions I made was new to me. My biggest test was the head men's and women's soccer coach, Marine Cano. He had a mouth worse than any sailor I'd ever heard about and was extremely demanding. He was not accustomed to working directly with a woman who had authority over medical related issues. Don’t get me wrong, he wasn’t all bad. His coaching style and knowledge of the game won him championships and he cared about his players. He was also very popular in the community and well liked on campus. It didn't take long to gain Coach Cano's trust. He respected every decision I made and my efforts to keep his teams healthy.

One of the greatest compliments he gave me was after he took a job at much larger university. He would call and tell me how much he wished I was still his athletic trainer. CSUDH was one of the smallest universities in the CSU system. At the time it was one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the country. If you wanted to be a teacher, nurse or go into the health sciences, this was the place.

Our campus was home to one of only a few "Prosthetics and Orthotics" programs along with USC as the only other "Occupational Therapy" major in California. Years later, my youngest sister would be accepted to the 1st cohort CSUDH would confer with a Master of Science degree. The campus and all it had to offer was a hidden gem! But in my mind, it was missing another important health care career that was close to my heart. You guessed it: Athletic training! We were largely considered a commuter campus, located close to the south bay with easy access to three neighboring freeways. It was the perfect location for students looking to stay close to home while attending a 4-year institution. After I was hired, Dennis and I equally shared the salary and responsibilities of a full-time position. As a result, we were identified as co-head athletic trainers but never actually worked together. I worked when he didn’t and he worked when I didn’t. Fortunately for me, Dennis had already put together an excellent sports medicine team. There was a system of health care management in place that I walked right into.

CSUDH was a small D2 athletic program but there were several sports that kept us extremely busy. There were no student athletic trainers to speak of to help us, so and were overwhelmed by the number of bodies we had to take care of. One thing about Dennis, he was not lazy and expected me to get the job done, just as he did. We found a way to provide quality care for all, it was a lot of work but I was up for the challenge! I must admit, I was surrounded by great people: coaches, administrators and physicians. I learned so much from various schools of thought and philosophies. I became an athletic trainer at CSULB but it was at CSUDH that I was "thrown in the fire," and forged to be a consummate professional and clinician.

We had a great team physician by the name of Dr. John O’Hara. Dr. O’Hara helped me hone my orthopedic assessments skills. I also had the privilege of learning from other "orthopods" from the Kerlan and Jobe "Sports Medicine Fellowship Program." These "Fellows" would come in on a weekly basis and provide clinical in-services for our athletes; which for me, was a weekly training in orthopedics. They all knew I was young and eager to improve my skillset, each adding a unique perspective to my metaphoric toolbox. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Dr. O'Hara, the "sports med fellows," Dr. Stevenson and Dr. Navarro who both went on to be very successful orthopedic surgeons. They were all instrumental in my growth and development as an athletic trainer.

In fact, Dr. Donald Stevenson was the first black orthopedic surgeon I had ever met and one of only a few in Los Angeles! Because we were only a handful of black sports medicine professionals, I believe he went above and beyond to make deposits into my knowledge bank. Between these three surgeons, I had special access to same day orthopedic services. I was allowed to be in the operating room for my athlete's surgeries and many more benefits associated with their programs. They challenged me to think on my feet and taught me to be meticulous in my orthopedic injury assessments.

Dennis eventually retired and the school was legally required to publicly post the job opening for a full-time certified head athletic trainer. Although I had been the co-head athletic trainer for about 3 years, I still had to apply and interview for the position. After I was hired for the position, I had a conversation with Sue Carberry, the AD, and my boss for those three years about the interview process. She told me that she listened to my interview from another office adjacent to the interview room. There was a particular question about "Affirmative Action." I had to dig really deep in my memory. I recalled reading an op-ed article my father had written back in the mid-seventies as a student at RCC. The article was published in the Riverside Press Telegram. I tended to hold on to things like that and would read the article every once in a while.

His opinion was simply that affirmative action was a highly misunderstood concept, that had been distorted and lied about by people who felt they were being either discriminated against or looked at it as a hand-out. He stated that it was a necessary policy that was developed in order to favor those groups of people who had suffered discrimination. He thought it to mean: all things being equal (in terms of their ability to do the job), a person who met the qualifications, should be given first opportunity to be hired by. The underrepresented group, who historically speaking, would be considered first because of past injustices. I believe my father was passionate about this subject as a result of the many times he and my mother where denied the opportunity for advancement. They were even denied interviews, when it was obvious that their co-workers with less experience or qualifications would be promoted. Thank God I had read it enough to able to expound on my father's op-ed piece. Sue Carberry, who was Caucasian, told me that my answer along with several other attributes caused her to select me for the job. One of my proudest moments came on a day, years later, when I had the opportunity to share the story of how I was hired at CSUDH at such a young age. This was at an awards banquet where I was being honored for "National Girls and Women in Sports Day." My parents had front row seats and while I was sharing my "affirmative action" story, I could see my father's eyes well with tears. He was probably surprised I even read the article and I’m sure he was proud too!

Although I also had a great working relationship with all the coaches, some of my best "on the job training" I had were the battles with them, male and female alike. I had a very contentious relationship was with the baseball coach, George Wing. We were always professional about it but we battled over our student-athletes right to play or right to play safely. Coach Wing and I always left our disagreements on the field. Off the field, we labored together year-round with our campus ministry, "Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Over time, I believe these coaches would soon come to respect me for my knowledge and hard work. They would eventually buy-in to the concept of "teamwork," and of our roles on the sports medicine staff. Most of our battles had nothing to do with my gender. I had only a few experiences where I had impugning thoughts of racial or gender discrimination. There were numerous times in my 20s that I was completely disregarded and overlooked with the assumption that my "male" student athletic trainer was the head athletic trainer. There was even a time at an alumni game where the coaches and staff were serving the parents and players when out of nowhere an old man asked me, "who are you, The Help?" I was shocked but I always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt. I tried to look at it not necessarily as a racist act but more than likely, implicit bias. Implicit bias meaning, the preconception based on past experience that a black woman couldn't possible have a respected position within the athletics department, ergo I must be “the Help.”

There was the time where one of the baseball pitchers "rudely" told me "don't ever touch my glove!" after moving it no more than a few inches so I could take my seat in the dugout. I chalked that up to the "superstitious" way baseball players can be. I decided to relocate myself outside the dugout behind a chain link fence. I found it safer there after one too many line drives made my life flash before me.

Coaches didn’t always appreciate my decision to remove an athlete from participation but in time I gained their trust and they all respected my decision. They came to realize and appreciate having someone reliable that could help their player get back on the field as quickly and safely as possible. For some reason, I always felt safe and protected amongst the "boys." With the boys, it seemed like I was treated more like a member of the team and the coaches made sure their student-athletes looked out for me as well. I had many coaches and administrators that I had great working relationships with over the years. Coach Dave Yanai was one of the kindest men on the planet but a tough father figure who cared about his players. He coached them in the game of life off the court. Coach Van Girard was a good friend who was another listening ear for me. Our sports information director (SID), Pat Guillen, and our equipment man, Will Henderson will forever have a special place in my heart for looking out for me when I needed help. These men all respected me for my work and saw me as an important member of the team. They are relationships that I have maintained to this day. There was also our associate athletic director, Dan Guerrero, who became the A.D. after Sue Carberry retired. Dan gave me so many life lesson's giving me the guidance that I needed to make the right decision.

The lesson I failed was a lesson I learned: There was a star pitcher who was failing my "Prevention and Treatment of Athletic Injuries" class. As a result, he was ineligible to participate in the post season play-off games. I was feeling great pressure to change his grade by everyone involved. Dan never said a word to me about it but after succumbing to the pressure and changing the grade he called me into the office to tell me that of all people, he was surprised that I folded under pressure and changed the star player's grade. My only response was, "I thought that's what you all wanted me to do." The lesson I learned from that experience and will take with me to the grave: if you feel strongly about something, never allow outside pressure to dictate your inner resolve. From then on it was easy. Some situations were obviously negotiable but the non-negotiable decisions were simply non-negotiable. I would never compromise my integrity for a win or compromise a student-athlete's health & safety for a win. Dan eventually left CSUDH for UC Irvine but left me life-lessons I still lean on to this day. The most important lesson Dan gave me in my early career was the importance of "Image" and "Substance," in the pursuit of Excellence. The second, never compromise what you know is right to do in order to appease others.

As the years passed, I started to have a deep yearning to be a mother. However, it wasn't time yet and I pressed on in the calling that was upon me. When the LA Clippers started practicing at CSUDH I became fairly close to Bernie LaReau who became my sounding board. I enjoyed our talks and he provided tremendous insight for what it was like to work on the professional level. Frankly, his stories actually turned me off to the NBA. I think he was trying to give me a realistic point of view regarding the behind the scene antics NBA athletic trainers had to deal with. He didn’t sugarcoat the demands of the job or captivate me with the fame and fortune that surrounded that environment. Since I was on the fence about staying in academia or pursuing the NBA, I decided to forego that dream, and press on.

I never had a burning desire to teach but fate came knocking again. After Dennis left, his athletic training classes were open and I was the logical choice to take over his course load. It was truly an unexpected surprise that I felt unprepared for. Me? A university lecturer? I knew it was time to dig deep and answer the call. What I lacked in teacher education courses, I made up for with work ethic, determination and the intestinal fortitude. It became one of the best things that could have ever happened to me. I am thoroughly convinced that teaching made me a better athletic trainer. I am extremely indebted to Dr. Mimi Frank who was the department chair. She also took a chance on hiring a young professional who had never taught before. I'm certain that without Dr. Frank, I would not have had that opportunity.

For the past few years, at the height of collegiate sports in October, I would go into Dan Guerrero's office and plead for additional staff. The answer was always the same. He would acknowledge the stress that I was under and that he understood my situation but would tell me year after year that the department was under funded. My only alternative was to recruit from my athletic training courses to build an internship program. He said that he would support me in any way possible but that was all I could do for now. I was able to pitch the concept to the next department chair Dr. James Poole, and he supported the idea. He gave me more classes to teach and advertised the new CSUDH athletic training internship program. We soon had a full staff of 15 athletic training interns and plenty on the wait list. CSUDH was becoming known for being a campus that catered to the south bay and before long, athletes became interested in the program.

The CSUDH internship program grew in popularity by word of mouth and gained even more traction at the 1995 Far West Athletic Trainers' Association Symposium (aka FWATA) in Las Vegas. Our group of student athletic trainers won 1st place in the first-ever "Student Athletic Trainer Jeopardy Challenge." This was an event where athletic training students from various universities competed against each other. During the symposium, "the talk of the town" was the fact that although CSUDH was not an accredited athletic training program, we still managed to beat the other accredited universities. That year, I also won the 1995 Athletic Management "Award of Excellence.” This award was in a series sponsored by the magazine, "Athletic Business Management.” That was a great feat considering we were an athletic training internship program with limited funding and no additional staff support. That twenty-five-year-old plaque is still proudly displayed in my home office. CSUDH was on the map and my name was buzzing among my colleagues. I was often approached at conferences and symposiums by people I didn’t know but they knew me. Truth be told though, over the years I was often mistaken for Carsandra Taylor, and vice versa. In those days we were usually the only black athletic trainers present from California, Nevada and Hawaii at the FWATA annual meetings.

Over the next few years, I grew in most all areas both personally and professionally. I became an EMT which became a great asset for my AT students. They enjoyed learning about "emergency care management." In 1995, TAPE PROS Sports Medicine Services was born out of the need for the Metropolitan LA and Orange County communities to have quality sports medicine services for short-term, weekend events. Frankly, I grew tired of fielding calls for "student trainers" to work for experience and came up with a concept. TAPE PROS would provide the community with medical personnel that would reduce liability and employ student athletic trainers. It didn’t take long before we were able to add sports physical therapist to our team.

The idea was cloned and now there are several companies providing such services. I am proud and honored to be one of the first in California to lead in this area. I believe the dream of owning a business could not have come to fruition without the help of the Double Pump Brothers. They allowed my student interns to work in their organization leading to an established bona fide company. With Double Pump we first worked for mostly tee shirts and basketball shoes. Eventually, TAPE PROS and its value were recognized and were paid accordingly.

The first paid gig for TAPE PROS was for the Anaheim Angels Tryout Camp. I was hired by Darrel Miller, the older brother of Reggie and Cheryl who played several seasons for the Angels as a catcher. But the real credit should go to the Pump Brothers for their loyalty to my company for over 20 years. I applied to be a medical volunteer at the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta, GA. It was a wonderful experience and my second opportunity to work the Olympics Games. This time I had been certified for 10 years which brought an entirely different perspective and set of responsibilities. I covered the practice venue for Track & Field and Judo and met so many wonderful colleagues and Olympians. The summer of 1996 will always be a memorable one. Along with the Olympics, I spent my downtime visiting the historic landmarks around Atlanta and studying and passing the Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) exam. I believe the CSCS credential brought everything full circle and made me a much better at my craft because strength and conditioning was my responsibility during the early days at CSUDH when the coaches could not have contact with athletes during the pre-season.

I really enjoyed life my professional life but my heart still yearned to be a mother. I kept myself busy by spending my free time working at my church, specifically with the women's and children's ministries. I also spent several consecutive summers vacationing in Mississippi working at a Christian youth camp operated by the Bingham family. Camp Pioneer was much different than the California camp. It offered more peace and tranquility and soon became my place of refuge, respite and restoration. It became the much needed get-away I looked forward to each summer. My job was to help in the kitchen but I still loved everything about it. At one point I had the opportunity to help "Aunt Ann" as the nurse's assistant for injured or sick kids. I had always believed that I had the spiritual gifts of hospitality and service to which I dedicated most of my time exercising those gifts.

Bernie LaReau had left the LA Clippers and Keith Jones was hired as the first black head athletic trainer in the NBA. This was a very big deal and Keith became a tremendous role model for many aspiring young black men in the field. I enjoyed our daily chats and appreciated all the supplies the Clippers donated to our program. This was also a time that I became curious as to what was next for me as an athletic trainer. One day the opportunity presented when I applied for a job at UCLA. I quickly withdrew my application when I learned there would be a $20,000.00 pay cut. That was when I decided I would firmly plant my feet into all things CSUDH--until motherhood kept calling and the LA Sparks came knocking.

My dream of being a mother was in motion by way of adoption. We were making weekly visits to a foster home where three beautiful children ages 2 1/2, 4 and 8 were eagerly waiting to be ours. During that time, I also met a woman named Rhonda Windham, the Los Angeles Sparks to General Manager. In the early 1980's, Rhonda was teammate to Cheryl Miller, Cynthia Cooper and Pam and Paula McGee. This was the all-star lineup that won two national championships for USC. Rhonda was putting the Sparks' team together as well as the support staff. I was recruited to be the LA Sparks first Head AT for the 1997 inaugural WNBA season. It was an offer I accepted without hesitation which finally put me in professional sports and as close to the NBA as possible.

On Friday May 9th, after six consecutive visits in the providence of God, proceeding Mother's Day, the children were scheduled to move in. Two days before Mother's Day-- What a gift! It was the happiest day of my life and my dream had finally come true. My life had changed completely going from zero to three kids overnight! Once the children were actually in our home, I spent the next few days trying to figure out how to make motherhood and a career work.

Being a full time professional athletic trainer and a mother of three overnight. There was no playbook on how to create harmony in the home and I realized I was faced with the greatest challenge of my life! It was almost like The Lord was testing me. I had begged God to be a mother for 8 years and now I was presented with a choice. What would be my greatest desire and what would be my highest calling. God had truly given me what my heart desired but the day of reckoning was upon me. The choice was obvious. On Friday, I became a mother and on Monday, I called Rhonda to turn down the offer.

I couldn't imagine bringing these three young children into the home only to start jet-setting across the country to take care of other people. Pros or not, like my father, that dream would have to be deferred. I took a leave of absence for a year to bond with the children. I decided that the call to motherhood would be my mission in life. I was resolved to pour myself into this answer to prayer. I gave up the idea of working on the professional level for good and aimed to be the best I could be at CSUDH.

Upon my return, I continued to teach in the Kinesiology department. I followed the path of Dennis Phelps sharing my full-time position with Ethan Krieswirth. About 3 years later, I felt my children needed me more at home so I resigned my position at CSUDH. As for work I was still certified, which allowed me to sub for a few of my colleagues but my main focus became the administrative side of TAPE PROS. I continued in that capacity and navigated through life as a homemaker raising my kids to the best of my ability. It was not easy to become a mother overnight. When I’m asked how I did it, my response was often "the 15 years I spent at CSUDH was a great training ground for motherhood." Those years taught me how to spin a lot of plates at the same time. I was taking care of student-athletes, teaching and supervising student athletic trainers. I didn’t know it but sinning all those plates gave me a wealth of knowledge and experience in the business of people. Dealing with all their many different personalities prepared me for what was ahead of me, both good and bad.

After being a homemaker for approximately six years, I received a call from the Compton College athletic director. My name was referred to him for a substitute for their upcoming Friday night football game. Their athletic trainer was out on a medical leave, and they desperately needed a qualified professional. I interviewed and was chosen to provide my services. That evening before the game, I bumped into the head soccer coach who was one of my former student's at CSUDH. He begged me to sub for their Saturday afternoon game, to which I agreed and returned for the soccer match the next day. After the football game, the head football coach asked me if I could come back on Monday (Labor Day 2006) because they hadn't been able to have contact in full pads since the athletic trainer went out on disability. I couldn't turn him down and so my life was about to take another turn. After discussions with the athletic director, Coach Allen Caveness who was also the head basketball coach, I was offered a long-term substitute position. I took a line straight out of the Godfather--I asked him to make me an offer that I couldn't refuse and he did just that. What was supposed to be a Friday night football game turned into a 9-month extended sub position. This became my training ground and ticket into the California Community College System. Ironically, the next week, my long-time colleague CSUDH, Ethan Krieswirth asked if I wanted my old kinesiology teaching position back. I don’t believe I coincidences, it was God's perfect timing and truly an answer to prayer.

**El Camino-Compton College/Los Angeles Southwest College**

Compared to CSUDH, my brief time at El Camino-Compton College was meaningful, impactful, and eye-opening. Before I arrived, Compton College was at risk for losing its accreditation. As a result, the college was placed under the umbrella of El Camino College with the hopes of getting the institution back into compliance. My indirect supervisor was Dr. Rory Natividad who happened to be one of my first athletic training students at CSUDH and who at the time was one of the deans at ECC. Rory excelled as an athletic trainer before transitioning into athletic administration, first as an athletic director and later advancing to Dean. He is currently a Dean at Cerritos Community College. It gives me great joy to stay in contact with my former students and follow their careers and accomplishments.

Over the next few months, I enjoyed developing relationships with the coaching staff and teams from all sports. I was certified approximately 20 years and with my six-year hiatus, I returned to the workforce with a significant age gap. The separation in age made me more like a mother figure to these Compton kids. My reputation proceeded me and I was well respected by the campus administrators receiving tremendous support for any ideas to enhance the program. I soon came to realize the impact of being an African American sports medicine clinician and role model for an inner-city athletics department.

Most of the athletes had never been exposed to a black person in this capacity and communicated their appreciation to me daily. Although there was plenty of diversity at CSUDH, it was quite different at Compton college where the school is predominately Black and Hispanic from low-income communities with very few Caucasian students. This was my first direct exposure to severely disenfranchised and marginalized people who felt utter hopelessness based on their family dynamics, upbringings and the ills of their communities. This dramatically affected their outlook on life and created a negative self-image that was quite palpable. I perceived a notable level of low self-worth, shame and insecurity.

It was said that my presence brought them the much-needed hope they coveted for a better life and future. They were not used to receiving genuine kindness, support and compassion from a complete stranger who owed them nothing but an ice pack. As a highly empathetic person, I gave these things naturally to each of my patients regardless of where they were from. I was often told that they were not used to all the care, love, respect and compassion which saddened me. It was as if they didn't feel worthy of someone of my caliber working at their school, in their "hood." Some even went as far as asking me, "Why are you here?" Followed by, "It seems like you can do better." To which I would always counter with the question, don't you all deserve the same quality of care as athletes at other colleges?" The mindset of these young people struck me deeply and wholly changed the trajectory of my path.

I arrived at a place that added so much more depth to my purpose. From then on, I knew my calling for the rest of my career would be to go where my colleagues would be less likely to go and stay. I had one vision in mind, which was to serve these young people with the quality-care they deserved. I intentionally let them know they could be successful if they put in the work and changed their mind set. I wanted them to know they were important, loved and deserving as any other student-athlete striving for a good education. It caused me to reflect and appreciate my own life and upbringing to which I became even more grateful. Committing myself to this effort was my opportunity to "give back" and help provide equity in the system of healthcare management that is lacking in the inner city.

Because I was relatively solo, I was blessed to have my niece Ashley Bingham (Maxim) join me as my first athletic trainer intern. Soon after, I hired Courtney Watson one day a week for football games. I first met Courtney, now Dr. Watson, a few years earlier when she enrolled in my kinesiology classes at CSUDH. She had already graduated from UC Berkley but Cal did not offer many of the undergraduate athletic training courses that CSUDH did. Courtney also worked for my company TAPE PROS and became a valuable asset to its early success before going on to work for the NBA's D league and later, the WNBA. Like so many others, I am equally proud of "Dr. Court" and especially enjoyed going to watch the LA Sparks games for whom she has been the head athletic trainer going on 15 years. There was no greater joy than watching the Sparks play the Phoenix Mercury who had Tamara Poole on their roster, another one of my former students at CSUDH. It was like an annual two-for-the-price-of-one "family outing," where truth be told, I had more fun watching Courtney and Tamara work their magic on the sidelines than I did watching the games. I cheered for both teams equally!

As fate would have it, just when my long-term sub position was nearing its end, I was recruited to work for Los Angeles Southwest College (LASC) which is one of nine community colleges in the Los Angeles Community College District. LACCD is the largest community college districts in the united states. I was referred to LASC by a friend and colleague, Joi Dawson (Richardson) who Courtney had introduced me to back in the 90s while I was still at CSUDH. I can only assume that because I was only one of a few Black, West Coast athletic trainers, people looked up to me and wanted to meet me. I was somewhat of a unicorn which was humbling. Joi was getting married and relocating to another state soon but she wanted the head football coach/athletic director, Henry Washington to know she was leaving the student-athletes in good hands. I was hired in 2007 and happy to do my part in yet another underserved community--South Central Los Angeles. One early lesson I learned from Coach Washington was that it pays to be good to people, not based on who they are or what they can do for you but solely out of the kindness of the heart.

Coach Washington had been the head football coach since 1982. A time when "colors" represented turf wars in certain communities and were more of an issue than any of the "red and blue" divide we see in today's political climate. None of the inner-city high schools or LASC had full-time certified athletic trainers. That duty usually fell on the head coaches like Coach Washington He had no choice but to care for them to the best of his ability for his first 10 years at LASC. The school had a certified athletic trainer on game days but the team was on their own during practices. I recall a day back in the late 80's when Coach Washington cold called me for help with a couple of football players whose injuries were severe and beyond his scope. He asked if he could bring them by CSUDH so I could properly assess and possibly refer them to the appropriate physician. Eventually Coach Washington told me that he posed a question to his superior, "If your son or daughter were playing sports at this school, would you want Henry Washington, the football coach to be responsible for his health care or would you want a certified athletic trainer?" Because of that thought-provoking question, within one month, they hired a full-time certified athletic trainer for both practices and games.

Upon meeting me 20 years later, at my initial interview, Coach's first question was aren't you the young lady who worked at CSUDH years ago? He then went on to remind me that he was the coach from LASC who brought his players to me for help. It was a lesson that I learned. Had I not been pleasant and helpful to him I might not have been hired. He also told me that as an athletic director he used to go to all the local community college, basketball games. He said when he went to watch basketball games at Compton College, it made him a little nervous because he could tell that my presence brought an element of professionalism he hadn't seen there before. His opinion was that when teams feel good about their school and feel good about themselves, they win games! We laughed and I was referred to the district office in downtown LA for a second interview which led to my hire at LASC. Joi recruited me to the same college I had long forgotten about. I had come full circle.

**LASC**

From 2007 to 2016 life at home and at LASC was filled with its normal vicissitudes. Over those 10 years, both my grandmothers had died after living long lives. My father and mother died far too soon at the ages of 64, and 69 respectively. My kids were getting older and seemed to need me less and I eventually got a divorce after over 20 years of a difficult marriage. On the flip side, TAPE PROS was growing by leaps and bounds. I reached a point where I had to turn down work and became very selective in the sub-contractors I hired. I had mostly certified athletic trainers and physical therapists on my team. Ashley followed me from Compton College as she completed her internship hours to meet the application requirements for the athletic training program at Cal State, Fullerton. She could have continued her training anywhere but she chose to follow me to LASC, which was flattering and I needed her assistance. But the sentiment and the culture were the same if not worse, then what I had just left at Compton Community College. The LASC athletes had the same mentality, "Why are you here? It seems like you could do better and be working at UCLA, USC or somewhere like that.” I had a similar response, "Don't you all deserve to be treated well?"

I worked hard to build an athletic trainer internship program which could not have been done without the support of Dr. Mimi Nakajima from CSULB and Dr. Sarah Strand from Loyola Marymount University. Over the years, they assigned so many young professionals that have gone onto do amazing work in the field! In fact, after a year or so we had a great team of student athletic trainers that gave me the needed support and recognition among my colleagues at other colleges. We had excellent sports medicine services provided by our Team Physician, Dr. Keith Feder and his right-hand woman, Jill Sleight from the West Coast Center for Orthopedics & Sports Medicine. We also had great sports medicine "fellows" who were supervised by my longstanding colleague Dr. Bernadette Pendergraph from the Harbor UCLA Sports Medicine Program, who worked tirelessly to bring exemplary sports medicine services to our campus once per week in the clinic and for all footballs. Over the years, I learned so much from Dr. Pendergraph.

Other highlights during that time period included my second marriage in 2012 to the man of my dreams, William Jarrett, aka "Coach Man.” I don't have enough time to describe all that he is to me, and the role he played when life started to go downhill for me. Though I am not fluent, I am one of about five certified athletic trainers in the USA with skills in American Sign Language (ASL). In 2015 I was invited to be the athletic trainer for the USA Deaf Women's Basketball team. We spent one month together, first for a one-week training camp at the "California School for the Deaf in Fremont, California. We then traveled to Taiwan for an additional three weeks to compete in the "World Deaf Games”. Our women's team took the gold medal and the men’s team took silver. This competition was one of the greatest experiences of my entire career. Even better than the two Olympics I worked! I was captivated with all the deaf basketball teams from all over the globe. I never could have imagined the many different languages spoken in sign. It was an experience that was beyond my two world Olympic participations. It was supposed to be the precursor for the Deaf Olympics, which were being held the next year in Turkey. Unfortunately, the Deaf Olympics were cancelled because of civil unrest.

I was also completely honored in 2015 to be the third inductee into the CSU, Long Beach Athletic Training Program's "Hall of Fame." It was an extremely high honor to be in the company of the first and second inductees, Dr. Daniel Arnheim (2013) and Dan Bailey (2014) with Dr. Keith Freeseman following right after me in (2016). They were all highly influential athletic training mentors who aided in my success.

During that time, I continued to have experiences that would not only prepare me for the future, but also serve as a foreshadowing of things to come. As the stakes got higher, I would have to play a more emergent role as a "spokesperson," for those with softer voices. There was a particular incident that involved my niece Ashley who already graduated from CSUF, was certified, had a master's degree and working at my alma mater, Riverside Poly HS. We were working the NFLPA Collegiate Bowl Game, a week-long highly regimented schedule of events & practices that culminated in a Saturday game at the Rose Bowl. If not for COVID-19 and the stay at home orders, January 2021 would have been the 9th out of 10 years that the NFLPA Collegiate Bowl Game would contract TAPE PROS to provide services for their 10th anniversary NFLPA Collegiate Bowl game. This was typically the last "bowl game" of the year composed of division 1 football players from universities all over the country and coached by former and current university and NFL coaches. I regarded it as a privilege to be there and made it well known to my staff that it was only hard work and professionalism that would keep us there.

One day while on the field during practice, Ashley approached me with a disturbed look on her face. She told me that a coach just yelled--"Hey Water Girl!!!" in front of everyone which was considered a huge insult to anyone working as a certified athletic trainer since educationally, this field of study is quite demanding and in stark contrast to Bobby Boucher in the "Water Boy." To be insulted with a label you would relegate to a high school team manager was demeaning and belittling! I knew I had to stand up for her, otherwise this disrespect would set a precedent for more unwelcomed behavior, especially for the females on my staff. I asked Ashley to point out the coach who committed this offense. It was Darrell Green the defensive back who previously played 11 years in the NFL for the Washington Redskins and in the early 80s was coined the nickname: "The Fastest Man in the NFL" for four consecutive years!

I approached Mr. Green, not really knowing his past fame and asked why he would call a well-educated, professional athletic trainer with a master's degree a "Water Girl?" I also went on to explain how hard it was to get here as a black, female entrepreneur and that as a people we have to do better. He was immediately apologetic and said he didn't mean any harm--he just wasn't thinking. He went on to tell me that he has two daughters and he would never want them to be disrespected in any way and asked for my forgiveness. He also said he was going to find Ashley and apologize to her directly, which he did. I believe he was genuinely sorry for his actions. As the days rolled on, Mr. Green went out of his way to be friendly and respectful of our positions as women on the medical team. He also made sure his players followed suit each year during each annual event thereafter. Other than that, encounter, all the coaches treated my staff and I with the utmost respect. Even on game days, the head coaches treated us the same way they did other certified athletic trainers they were accustomed to working with. They came in the facility during the week and on game day for the injury report and were part of the decision-making process on their players without regard for my gender. They treated us the same way they would any male athletic trainer doing the same job.

In 2016, Coach Washington decided to retire after coaching at LASC for 34 years. I was with him for his last 10 years and I'm happy to say we had a great professional relationship and proud to call him my friend. He and his staff coached the games and my staff and I took care of the prevention and treatment of his player's injuries. Coach Washington made sure his assistant coaches knew I was in charge of the medical issues and just like I don't coach, they should not be advising on or treating injuries. Coach Washington and his assistants always looking out for me, making sure I was safe and I never I left in the field house alone after practices or games.

I met with the new head coach to bring him up to speed on the system of health care management that was in place for the last 10 years. I was open to anything he thought needed to be changed or adjusted but was soon in shock by his attitude and arrogance during our first meeting. He "threw cold water" on the first three items I proposed and the meeting ended quite abruptly with the following statement. "I'm glad you're married because women are a distraction and I don't want any female student trainers on my field." I'm not sure what century he thought that he was in but this was the 21st century. Even if one was thinking something that outrageous, it wouldn't be spoken unless you were dealing with someone who was impulsive and without discipline of their tongue. After all, didn’t he know there are workplace laws against such violations. For the first time in my career going back to 1986, I was no longer a part of the team. I was perceived as a threat to the new head coach's agenda. He soon found out I was serious about carrying out my job responsibilities and would not be impressed or intimidated by his grandiosity or inflated ego.

My early years at LASC were some of the best years of my athletic training career. My purpose was fulfilled and I was making an impact on student-athletes in the underserved community of South-Central LA. I also had the privilege of mentoring so many athletic training students who would continue the work I dedicated my life to. For the most part, life at work was typical for an athletic trainer. I handled patient care, provision of services for practices and games and teaching and supervision for our athletic training students. I had great working relationships with the coaches, there was an outpouring of community support from the sports medicine practitioners who dared to come to "South-Central" to ensure that our student-athletes had comparable care. That is why writing this last section has been such a difficult task for me. Perhaps, subconsciously, I wanted to erase the memories I have suppressed for so long and have been working through with counseling. The pain and suffering inflicted on the football team and the emotional abuse I personally endured between 2017 and 2019 caused me to react in a way that is not consistent with the rest of my life. To this end I have avoided sitting down at my computer to memorialize the closing details of my last chapter on the campus of LASC. Despite my hesitancy, I knew deep down I had to face my fears and put an end to the past so that I could move on to my future.

In 2016, Coach Washington decided to retire after coaching at the high school level for several years followed by coaching at LASC for 34 years. I was with him for his last 10 years and we had a great professional relationship. As the only woman in this male dominated arena, Coach Washington and his assistants always looked out for me. They made sure I was safe by never leaving me in the field house alone after practices or games. Coach Washington made sure all the assistant coaches knew I had medical authority over the student-athletes and I was in charge of all player health and safety. It was clear that I didn't interfere with coaching and they were not to interfere with my ability to perform my duties as an athletic trainer, especially in relation to injury care and management. Once Coach Washington was officially gone, the only other close colleague I had in athletics was the head basketball coach Reggie Morris who was there many years prior to my hiring in 2007. We also had an amicable relationship and he always respected my decision for the health and safety of his players. Over the years, he really seemed to appreciate my contribution to the well-being of his teams. Coach Morris also wore the hat of dean and served as the chair of the counseling department. After retiring as the head basketball coach, he became our athletic director in conjunction with his counseling responsibilities. Dean Morris was a consummate professional who was well respected in the coaching community and chose to spend his entire career serving and advocating for underserved students. He was a pillar in the community and a strong advocate for athlete success, always having their best interest at heart.

Unfortunately, after Coach Washington left, things really changed for me. The football program, the on-field management, the AT clinic and the fieldhouse satellite facility morphed into something I no longer recognized. For the first time in my career starting in 1986, I was no longer a part of the team and was perceived to be a threat to the new head coach's agenda. During our first meeting on April 5th, 2017, we met privately to bring him up to speed on the "system of health care management" that was in place since I took over as the AT in 2007. I was willing to discuss anything he thought needed to be changed or adjusted. To my surprise, his demeanor was aloof and he was disinterested in anything and everything I proposed. After he dismissed the first three agenda items I mentioned, the meeting took a sudden and dark turn. Out of nowhere he looked at my ring and made the unbelievable statement, "I'm glad you're married because women are a distraction and I don't want any female student trainers on my sideline." After all, it was the 21st century and even if one was thinking something that outrageous and inflammatory, you wouldn’t be bold enough to say it.

A statement like that wouldn't normally be spoken aloud unless it came from one who was impulsive, without discipline of the tongue, accustomed to spewing appalling arrogance, and allowed to roam around with unchecked behavior. Although I never needed this type of protection in the workplace, I knew there were governmental laws that prohibited this ideology and behavior. I told him his statement took me back 30 years when I first started in the field as a young woman of color who worked hard to carry myself in a professional manner. I dedicated myself to garner the respect of those who questioned my motives for going into a male dominated field. Athletes I worked with back then were not used to seeing black health care providers, especially black women and would blatantly ask me foolish questions like, "Why are you here?" Or, "Are you looking for a man?" I constantly felt like I had to prove that I belonged there and could conduct myself without breeching professional boundaries and quite often felt like I was being tested to see if I would take the bait--which I never did. I can only assume my motives were questioned because in their environment the only black women they saw were groupies, gold diggers and others with ulterior motives. I could see his utter disregard after sharing the heartfelt plight of my early career. I abruptly discontinued the meeting with the hope of tabling the discussion for another day, in the presence of our athletics administrator. The season was starting soon, so policy needed to be set quickly and ignorance needed to be put aside.

Trying to give this coach the benefit of the doubt, I did not immediately report the statement he made in that meeting. I assumed that his mindset stemmed from his inexperience at the intercollegiate level. I was hoping with some tutelage on professional conduct and decorum he would come around. More than hope, I truly thought he would change once he realized that the autonomy and dictator leadership style and behavior he brought with him as a high school coach would not fly on this level.

During the spring and summer conditioning programs of 2017 I found out just how serious the coach was about not having "females" on his sideline. One day my staff and I went to the field as usual but we were told that we would now need to relocate to the back of the south end zone. To say I was "taken aback" is an understatement. I reached a boiling point at his audacity to try and control and bully me and the athletic training students. I tried to explain to him that it is logical and customary for the athletic training staff to station themselves on the track near the 50-yard line during practices and games. This allows for easy access should an athlete go down on the field north or south of the 50-yard line. I balked at his assertion to relocate my staff and I made it clear that I was not willing to comply with his request which rang out more like an edict. He soon learned that I was serious about carrying out my work responsibilities as outlined in the LACCD Human Resource Department's job description and the California Community College Athletic Association (CCCAA) "Medical Policies." I made it crystal clear that I would not be intimidated by his entitlement, grandiosity or inflated ego.

With that said, my staff and I remained stationed on the track like any high school, college, university or professional football team would do. The next week, to my surprise, I noticed that all the sideline benches (on both sides of the field) had been moved behind the south end zone, which was a power play based on immaturity and unfounded logic that relocating us to south end zone would keep the football players from coming into contact with the "female" student trainers. The message was loud and clear that we were not welcomed to sit on the sideline and "our place" was not where we should be but where he demanded us to be. As if it was a declaration of war, I wasn't going to go down that easily. In righteous defiance, my staff and I stood and huddled together to provide care to the athletes; and I continued to teach the athletic training students during down time from hydration and injury management duties.

I was portrayed as the enemy. His highly unusual hostile behavior was wrought with malevolence that challenged my most temperate sensibilities. In addition to the discriminatory practices against me, he was overtly abusive, and bullied the football players on extraordinary levels. He used an arsenal of weapons to be manipulative and cruel. His daily speech and coaching was laced with shamed-based criticism, demeaning personal attacks, homophobic slurs, explicit profanity, humiliation, gaslighting, child-like temper tantrums, brainwashing and mind games. It was clear to me I was dealing with a man consumed with inner turmoil and emotional instability. He was not simply your run-of-the-mill jerk; his behavior was not like anything I had ever seen in my 30 plus years of working in sports--from youth athletes to professionals. I don’t know what he was like coaching at the high school level but this was nothing short of "abuse of power" by the hands of a head coach with no moral compass. His vulgar language and actions were filled with what in my opinion was indicative of "self-loathing" which he projected onto our student-athletes. Young men who had escaped the streets and saw football as a springboard to the education they needed to succeed in life by earning the opportunity to attend college and play at the university level. Student-athletes who looked to him for leadership, guidance, and direction, but in turn received hate, confusion, devaluation, belittlement, and shame. Manipulating and bending their minds by fomenting division between them and me. His main goal was to make sure they heard only one voice: His! To accomplish that mission the team was banned from seeking services including taping or treatment in the AT clinic and punished if he found out they did.

A few weeks later I was exiting the fieldhouse elevator after visiting the women's staff restroom which was located on the second floor of the same building the satellite AT facility was housed in. I was then told by the head coach that I would no longer be able to use that restroom. When I asked him "why not?" He stated, “because I don't want females upstairs." I was directed to use the 1st floor former women's track locker room. After the track team was discontinued, that locker room was used as a makeshift storage room for large custodial equipment. It didn't have soap dispensers or hot water and was commonly used by male coaches who walked in on me on more than one occasion. Rather than argue, I told my AT students that we would use the spectator’s restroom across the track and football field. Shamefully, I had to direct our female sports doctors there as well.

To make matters worse, this locker room turned storage room would be reserved for the officials on game days which meant we would not even have been allowed to use the fieldhouse facilities at all. We had to race through the traffic of people in the concession lines and use the visiting spectator's public restroom. This was completely disrespectful and to add salt to the wound the male athletic training students were allowed to use the fieldhouse facilities. The upstairs women's staff locker room was in a safe, private location and was one the closest and the most convenient facility the women on my staff could find relief. Having to use a facility across the track and football field was not only inconvenient and humiliating, it put the athletes at risk since I was the only certified athletic trainer there.

I'll never forget feeling like the NASA mathematician, Katherine Johnson (played by Taraji Henson) in the movie "Hidden Figures." Mrs. Johnson and other black women who were gifted in mathematics, worked as "computers" but were not allowed to use the building's primary restrooms because the company was segregated. As a result, they had to use the restroom designated for blacks in a different area outside their main building and a significant distance away. Although her gifted math mind and contribution to space was welcomed, she was still forced to use another facility. As I think back, I often held my bladder, not because my workplace was segregated by Jim Crow. My workplace discrimination was rooted in misogyny and control. Incredibly Ms. Johnson's mistreatment was in the 1950's while I was still subjected to this same treatment over 60 years later by the hands of a black man.

This was the last straw! His disparaging remarks about me and aberrant behavior towards the football players was the beginning of the "fight of my life." I was driven by a strong sense of moral duty to protect my patient's health and safety and to stand for what was right. However, I knew I could not engage in this fight alone. It would take courage, strength, and resilience that could only come from God. In Deuteronomy 31:6 the scripture says, "Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or in dread of them, for the Lord your God is the One who is going with you. He will not desert you or abandon you."

As his level of aggression escalated, his actions became more egregious. I had no idea what I was up against or what type of personality I was dealing with but I knew I had to follow the mantra "If you see something, say something!" As he became more manipulative, crafty and dangerous with each passing day, I decided that it was time to report his abuse and high-risk behavior. It became apparent to me that this wasn't just inexperience or youthful pride. This was something much deeper, this was pathologic. I could no longer remain quiet. The misogynistic lens he viewed women through was a battle I would not be able to fight alone. Because I wanted to make sure my grievances were valid, I called another campus administrator and asked if we could talk "off the record." I disclosed what was said to me during the initial meeting back in April, the stunt he pulled with the sideline bleachers so "females" couldn't sit or treat injured players on the center field sideline and the fact that I was no longer permitted to use the upstairs restroom that was designed and labeled specifically for women staff.

The administrator couldn't believe what he was hearing and after a brief pause, responded by saying "First of all not permitting you to use that restroom could be a "federal" violation. Continuing on to say, "Willda, I don't know if Bill Cosby violated those women or not, but don't be like them, coming out of the woodwork years later. If you have something to say, say it now." I expressed my appreciation for speaking with me and decided that it was time to report the coach's antagonistic behavior and poor treatment of me and the football players. It was good advice and I was glad that I acted on it. Because my initial report of the coach's statement was documented well before the “Me Too” and the “Times Up” movements kicked off, I was not accused of jumping on the band wagon. To this day, I don't see myself as a whistle blower, I am a "truth-teller" who took an oath in 1986 at my certification exam to advocate for the health and safety of the student-athletes under my purview. One of the greatest quotes I held close to my heart during the worst of times was by Nelson Mandela: "Fools multiply when wise men are silent." I had to be the voice that would at least slow the bleeding from the emotional wounds and trauma that were being inflicted upon the football team at the hands of this coach. On a more spiritual note, the bible says in Proverbs 31:8 "Open your mouth for the people who cannot speak, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the poor and needy."

**Road to Justice**

In the summer of 2017, prior to the retirement of Dean Morris from his counseling and athletic director (AD) positions, he called an athletic department meeting. After our business concluded, he excused the basketball coaches and asked the football coach and me to stay. He wanted to mediate the aforementioned events of April 5th. Dean Morris didn't mince words and got right to the crux of the matter. It was brought to his attention that there was a schism between the head coach and he wanted this dark cloud resolved immediately. His true character was revealed as he repeatedly lied and denied the accusations. In addition to his denials he asked the AD to explain to me that he was not my boss. A statement that I had made to him on numerous occasions and one that Dean Morris completely dismissed. As the meeting progressed, his character continued to regress. At the same meeting when I first met our new coach, I brought the topic of using metabolic conditioning for the injured athletes. It was a foreign concept to him. I now hear him telling Dean Morris that it was his idea. I quickly called him out on another one of his Pinocchios. At this point I believed that he was so used to "gaslighting" people, that he didn't even give a thought to whether his lies made sense or not. Lastly, he told the AD that I went on a "smear campaign" against him on Facebook which poses the question, why was he searching me on Facebook? At that point all I could do was laugh. I explained to the Dean Morris that back in November of 2016, (before I even met this coach), I did post some photos of my husband "dressed to a tee" for his LASC head football coach interview. Asking my FB friends and family to pray for my husband sounded nothing like a smear campaign to me. Dean Morris agreed and transitioned the meeting to readdressing my accusation of the discriminatory remarks. Dean Morris then asked him why I would make up such a thing?" The coach's response, tone and disrespectful demeanor would have surprised anyone but me. I had experienced enough of his deviant nature to expect the worst and that's what happened. He said he thinks I was upset that my husband didn't get the job, so I made it all up. My husband was a former football player at LASC back in the late 80s/early 90s and a longtime supporter of the college. He was encouraged to apply for the position by other supporters of the program. Although he thought he had a lot to contribute to the success of the football program, he understood and respected the hiring committee's decision. He went on with life as usual, being hopeful that the new coach could turn the program around with every intention of fully supporting him and the team.

Dean Morris went on to say that he has worked with me for 10 years and knows my husband and me to be of solid character and not one to look for revenge. Sensing that the AD was not on "his side," the coach had a dramatic shift in mood and style. While they bantered and wrangled, I sat in disbelief at what I was hearing. It was as if he were upset that someone would dare question him or his actions. The coach raised his voice and became even more disrespectful. This recalcitrant behavior was immediately squelched by Dean Morris while transitioning the meeting to enlightening him on Title IX and sex-based discrimination. The meeting concluded with little resolution other than the coach was put on notice that his discriminatory language or behavior would not be tolerated. After meeting with Dean Morris, and his subsequent retirement that summer, things only got worse. I can only surmise that the football coach could not come to grips with the notion that a woman had stood up to him.

The VP of Student Affairs was now the acting AD until another was hired. We discussed what had transpired prior to Dan Morris' departure to which he suggested that my staff and I refrain from going to the fieldhouse for a couple of weeks. His logic was the coach would be on his own until he realized my value to the team and then want me back. I spent the next two weeks dedicating myself to teaching the athletic training students and aids, signing off on their competencies and treating the other sports teams who used the Fitness and Wellness AT Clinic. The VP called another meeting to see if we could iron out our differences in a constructive manner. The summer was rapidly approaching and there was athletic department business that needed to be addressed prior to the upcoming season. I was open to doing anything that would put the past behind us and bring cohesion and harmony to our respective roles. The meeting started out with palpable tension as the VP served as the mediator. Three hours later, it seemed that there was resolution and a commitment from both parties to put our differences aside so we could both do our jobs effectively.

We scheduled our team meetings for the next week and my staff and I resumed our positions back on the field. Unfortunately, I was a bit too trusting. I agreed at the meeting that my presentation to the team would follow the VP and his associate administrator's. As I arrived for my presentation I was ambushed in front of my student ATs with a barrage of insults and negative comments questioning why I was late. The coach sat in the front of the room looking at his cell phone, completely uninterested in what I was presenting to the team. He was indignant and made sure to interrupt me casting aspersions upon me whenever possible.

It was obvious that he was trying to invalidate my position as the team's primary health care provider and first responder. By muttering disparaging comments and devaluing my role and authority over the medical issues, he created a breech in the trust, the team had for me especially the returning players from 2016. Another example of the way he would try to gain control over their minds as the season progressed. Consequently, there were several athletes who confessed that he constantly told them "they were either on his side or my side." As the meeting continued, the football players had confused looks on their faces, knowing their coach's conduct was divisive.

It was like working with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. At one point the VP had to step out of the room to take a call. The coach took that opportunity to question the information I was disseminating. His feeble attempts to humiliate and berate me in front of everyone increased to the point that I turned to his associate and asked if I could get some help? I realized I was on my own, so I rushed through my presentation cutting it in half. It came time to collect the LACCD documents. Traditionally, this would be done by myself and the AT students. We would review the information before letting the athletes go. The coach and I argued about who would keep the documents. He said they were "grown men" and had the right to keep their own paperwork even though we had at least four minors in attendance. I continued to argue the fact that it was my responsibility to review the documents for the appropriate signatures and store the records for future reference. as do all the LACCD athletic trainers. I further explained that the only ones who should keep their paperwork were the minors,, who would need signatures from their parents or guardians. He also told me the *he* should keep the Pre-participation Exam (PPE/health physical) forms.

I told him I would "absolutely not" turn those documents over to him; notwithstanding that fact that medical information is protected by the HIPAA law. I left without the LACCD documents. He had gotten his way which later resulted in a host of problems. In his possession the paperwork was not properly reconciled which led to issues when an athlete needed to seek off campus medical attention. The next day when the football players came in for treatment they asked me why we were going at it so hard? To which I responded, "no comment." Later that week, I found out he had random women not employed by LASC or the LACCD doing his administrative work. They were handling confidential documents in opposition to the medical policies (specifically By Law 9) as outlined in the CCCAA Constitution. Nothing changed as we got closer to the season because he was never properly reprimanded.

By now, it was the beginning of June and time for our annual "Preceptors" meeting at Long Beach State. Over the years, our athletic department had an affiliation with CSULB, and Loyola Marymount University (LMU). This allowed their AT students to have a football rotation with our sports medicine team. They would participate in every aspect of our system of health care management. I was the preceptor (teaching supervisor). I shared with my colleagues the coach's misogynistic and discriminatory behavior towards me and the abusive conduct towards our football players. Everyone was appalled, but some were not surprised. A few of the older, male ATs in attendance shared some of their "back in the day" experiences with antagonistic coaches. One even said he couldn't imagine what hardships women in AT have had to endure over the years when faced with these issues. My fellow preceptors gave me tips and encouraged me to continue to stand my ground. The next day, I received an email from a CSULB administrator who was present at the meeting. He felt bad for me and suggested that I reach out to the interim LASC president. The thinking was, since we were both CSULB alumni, and women of African American descent, she would have compassion for me and understand my plight. Her position of authority and obligation to act on behalf of our student-athletes and myself would change the scope and scale of the coach's behavior. He was sure that those commonalities plus the fact that my cries were not being properly managed by my direct supervisor would be cause for her to intervene since she held the highest position of leadership on campus. I was completely thankful for his advice but opted to wait to see if things would improve before playing my last card. One thing I learned from my former boss at CSUDH, Dan Guerrero was the importance of following the proper chain of command before going to the top administrator.

Leaving my safe haven in the Fitness and Wellness center and going down to the football stadium became more and more emotionally challenging each and every day. It started to feel much like a daily chess match as my posture soon became a constant state of defense. I would try to anticipate his every move in order to counter his mind games and manipulative, passive aggressive attacks. I worked at shielding my athletic training students from the madness, so they could remain mentally healthy and have a semblance of what a normal and valuable clinical rotation experience should entail. All this in addition to keeping up with the emotional health of the players. I started to feel like I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. I knew I needed to fortify myself with God's Word especially on the days when I just didn't have the strength or mental energy to stand strong. Those were the days where I had to go to the Lord in prayer. I could not give- up because I knew the players were depending on me to not only be their advocate but also their voice of reason and protection. They came to the AT clinic on the upper campus to vent their concerns, frustrations, and disbelief of their head coach's behavior. Most of the assistant coaches were at minimum enablers and some were equally complicit. There were many days that I felt too weak to continue but as I clung to the promises of God, I indeed received new mercies every morning that gave me a great deal of hope: "When you feel like you're hanging on by a thread, make sure it's the hem of Jesus' garment." Another thing I've done all my adult life when I was in need of a dose of courage, strength, and bravery to stand firm was to call my sister Viveca. She is small but fierce and always gave me the push I needed to weather the storm. Her words gave me strength as she told me "Whatever you do, don't let that coach make you quit your job, you've come this far by faith!" My mission was to follow the advice of "Dory" in the movie Finding Nemo: Just keep swimming! The up and coming song writer, Morgan Harper Nichols said it best--"Bravery is the audacity to be unhindered by failures and to walk with freedom, strength, and hope, in the face of the unknown." Although I was truly facing the unknown, I knew from the 23rd Psalms the Lord was walking with me which gave me the courage to brave the storm.

Earlier in the spring, I attended our annual FWATA symposium where an expert researcher on the subject of heat related conditions gave a very compelling presentation on his latest research studies and the importance of using Best Practices in the treatment of patients with heat stroke. He stated again and again that the core temperature must be taken to confirm hyperthermia. He reiterated over and again that even if there were an ambulance on scene, they were to wait until the patient's core temp was down to a safe level before transporting, and the cooling needed to take place within 30 minutes of the first signs of heat stroke. He said if transported too soon, the risk would be too great, and the athlete could consequently die of kidney failure. Although I had attended numerous presentations on heat illnesses, I was struck by this presenter’s passion in telling us to follow the best practice for our profession: Cool First, then Transport. He said if we don't follow these best practices then we could expect our lively hoods to be in jeopardy and a huge lawsuit to be filed against the institution, especially if the athlete did not survive. His words reverberated deeply within me, and I vowed to always have a cold-water immersion tank on standby in case I was in this situation and needed to save the life of my patient in this type of distress.

On August 23rd the district ATs convened for our annual LACCD AT/Risk Management meeting at the district office where we discussed policies, insurance matters, and risk management issues. I thought this would be a good time to share with my colleagues the transgressions taking place on our campus with our new head football coach. I described each "major" event in detail. My colleagues were equally as appalled as those at the preceptors meeting. This was also a segue for the other ATs to voice various concerns taking place on their campuses. Before the meeting concluded the LACCD Vice Chancellor of Human Resources and another gentleman who worked at the district office were introduced. The vice chancellor encouraged us by stating that he was disturbed to learn this type behavior was happening, and whatever he needed to do, including visiting our campuses, he would do in support of us. I returned to my campus the next day to find that it was business as usual with the coach.

Three days later, the coach's behavior became quite concerning as he became woefully scornful towards me. He truly would smile in my face and act cordial to me in front of the team but play mind games and try to get me in trouble on every turn. On the last Saturday in August there was an incident that nearly cost a player his life. On this particular Saturday morning, the weather was very hot I was alone without any assistance from my AT students. By then it was such a negative experience that I tried my best to shelter them from the coaching abuse. We were going to have football games on the next 10 consecutive Saturdays. I was on the sideline filling water bottles as fast as I could while players who were out with injuries were taking them on the field to the players. I was so busy with this task that I could barely look up to see what was happening on the field. As soon as the practice ended, a player collapsed and started writhing in pain while players were yelling for me because he was "cramping." As I assessed his condition, I asked another player if he would run to the sideline bench and grab a bottle of Gatorade. I added some additional electrolytes to the bottle and asked another player to help him drink from the bottle as I gently massaged and stretched his calves with ice nuggets hoping to relieve his muscle spasms. This technique, which is usually quite effective did not help, and the spasms soon escalated to full body cramping. I was concerned that there could be an underlying condition such as Rhabdomyolysis or other life-threatening heat related illness. I asked the player assisting to help me get his shoulder pads off and sit with him on the back of the cart while I drove to the satellite AT facility about 100 yards away. The goal was to get him into the cold whirlpool to bring his core temperature down. After about five minutes, his muscle spasms began to subside. I gave him a Gatorade bottle so he could continue to hydrate and asked him if I could take a photo of him in the whirlpool and share his heat related illness with my class. The plan was to keep him in the ice bath for another 10 minutes. All of a sudden he began howling as the pain suddenly intensified. He was now standing up in the whirlpool crying and screaming at the top of his lungs, "Mrs. Willda, help me!!!!"

I attempted to call the campus Sheriff's station (which was only about 75 feet up the hill from the AT facility) so they could activate the EMS. By then the patient had calmed down significantly but was still in pain as he struggled to remain seated, but I knew this was more than muscle spasms and I needed him transported to the ER/ED immediately. For some reason the Sheriff station did not pick up the phone. Therefore, I needed help from the team which was still on the field while listening to the coach's post practice talk. I needed someone to run up the hill to tell them to call the paramedics. While the patient was in the whirlpool, my only option was to blow the horn on my cart to get the team's attention since the Sheriff station was still not picking up my call and this was an emergency situation. I kept blowing the cart horn and frantically waving my arms to get their attention. I'm also running back to the facility to keep watch over my patient neck deep in the whirlpool. After doing this back and forth sprint between the front door of the facility and running back to blow the blaring sound of the cart horn I saw the team and the coaches turn around three times to look at me and then go back to business as usual. Finally, on the third try, the Sheriff's station answered and I communicated that I had a football player that needed to get to the ER immediately. The fire trucks and ambulance rolled down the hill. So did the sheriff personnel to take their injury report. I even asked one of them why they weren't answering the phone. The paramedics took over, leaving the patient in the whirlpool while they performed their assessment.

I was furious and tried my best to keep from crying tears of outrage. I was in disbelief that the coach would instead of putting his beef with me aside, would have so much contempt for me, and a callous disregard for the life of one of his own players that he would ignore my plea for help. While the paramedics continued their assessment, all I could do was pace back and forth. While I was outside the facility trying to gather myself and calm down, a group of assistant coaches came through the gate to check on the player. I immediately met them at the gate and yelled "Didn't you guys hear me blowing the horn and see me waving my arms?" The look in their eyes said yes. I then yelled, "AND NO ONE CAME TO HELP?!!!" I could see the shock on their faces as these men turned around realizing it would not be a good idea to enter the AT facility at that time. Eventually, one of the assistant coaches came in as I was talking to the paramedic. He quietly sat on the treatment table without interruption. Then the head coach finally came in and sat next to his assistant. I overheard the head coach telling his assistant, "Yea, he's just having some muscle cramps. I used to get those all the time." That comment set me into orbit as I walked up close to him yelling, “those weren't muscle spasms!!" I then asked him the same question, "didn't you see me waving my arms and hear me blowing the cart horn?" He arrogantly responded, "We can talk about that later." I then snapped back and said, "No! We can talk about it now!!!" Because of his lackadaisical attitude and the stress, he put me through I lost all manner of care or concern for professional etiquette or self-control. I got in his face and yelled, "AND NO ONE CAME TO HELP?!!! At that point the paramedic called at us to keep it down so they could do their work. Seeing my fury, the coach left the facility.

After he left, I took some deep breaths hoping to bring calm to my entire being. I am typically not a yeller, or one to get loud with others, but I must admit, this was the first time in my entire career that I went plum crazy! The coach's actions were beyond the pale and I could not hold it any longer. After the paramedics deemed it was safe to transport, the patient asked me if I could go get his wallet and cell phone from his locker. By then I was completely calm and headed to the coach's office so he could open the locker. He was standing in the doorway outside the building. It was slightly awkward, but we both acted as if the recent exchange had never occurred. Neither of us said a word. He gave me the patient's belongings and the ambulance whisked him off to the hospital. I continued to calm myself and clean-up to end the day as a large group of football players entered the facility. I stopped them immediately and in my calmest voice asked them if they saw me waving my arms and blowing the cart horn? They immediately backed away and one confessed up saying, "Mrs. Willda, we tried to tell him several times that you looked like you needed help, but he said, "F---k her. I don't give a F---k! I nodded my head and said ok. I helped them with their ice packs and they left the facility. As I was cleaning up, an athletics administrator who had never visited me in the facility before peeked their head through the door and asked how I was doing. I guess the coach sent this administrator to check my temperature but I had already learned over time not to show my hand. I calmly responded, "I'm doing just fine. How are you?"

After everyone had departed, I thought I needed to report this incident. A student was transported to the hospital and I felt my boss should know. I told him the whole story of the events that had transpired and he instructed me to write down the account in full detail and email it to him. He said that he would need to immediately notify his boss, the interim president, because a student was in the hospital as a result of an on-campus incident. That horrifying experience was extremely traumatizing to say the least. But I went home and relived every second, being careful to include all of the particulars. The account ended up being a five-page report that I not only emailed to my boss, but also to the LACCD's risk management department. Everything I experienced with this coach up to then were reportable incidents, but this was on a whole other level. I felt the LACCD division of risk management needed to know that this coach's actions were reprehensible and he needed to be stopped before someone died. There was never a word spoken to me about the incident but I know the LACCD's Vice Chancellor of Human Resources, that same administrator that spoke at the end of our meeting a few days earlier was privy to the 5-page report. I know this because I accidentally received an email where he asked someone from Risk Management to "look into" the incident. However, even though this was the second time the Vice Chancellor of HR had been made aware of the coach's conduct there was still no action taken against him. This was the beginning of me officially complaining to the union and taking another trip to the campus "Title IX" coordinator's office to file an "official" complaint with her against the coach. After seeing how determined he was (risking the health, safety and life of our athletes) to cause me mental anguish and continuing to get away with it, I also became fearful of him. For him to have so much contempt for me, I didn't know what lengths he would take to push me out.

The student-athlete involved in the incident contacted me from the hospital to tell me they were keeping him over night to monitor his kidney's and the medical condition that had occurred due to the heat and physical exertion. He thanked me and told me he thought he was going to die if I hadn't helped him. He didn't have a lot of family support so I told him I would visit him the next day. I brought him lunch, and we chatted about his family situation since they were not there. We also discussed the incident because he was wondering about some of the details of the event. I asked him why he didn't say anything before collapsing on the field. He told me he tried to come out but the coaches wouldn't let him. He also told me the doctors said he could have died if I didn't put him in the cold water. I was shocked that not one coach came to visit him in the hospital but shrugged it off as just another uncaring act of selfishness. The doctors said his lab numbers were good, so he would be discharged in the late afternoon. When he showed up the next week, I saw the football players greet him and ask what happened. It was almost like he enjoyed the attention and was wearing his condition like a badge of honor and shield of valor, as he told his teammates all about his hospitalization, medical condition an what the ER/ED doctors called a close call. I also met him at the gate, glad to see he was doing better. Being familiar with his condition, I knew he would not be able to continue to participate in the remainder of the season and that he would need a full work-up before returning the next season. I broke the news to him that he was out, and told him it was for his safety, and that I would help him ease back into conditioning in the AT clinic when it was time. I also had him seen by our doctors and had them write a note so he could get some additional time off his job. He told me the head coach wanted to meet with him which upon hearing that, I already knew what was coming. In my opinion, the coach knew he had to do some serious "damage control," which I witnessed the assistant coaches do before my very eyes and ears. This included gaslighting the player into thinking it was his fault for being out of shape and telling him to take time off to get in good shape to prevent this from happening again so he could join the team next year. I was used to the mind games and manipulation from the head coach, and now saw these tactics it start to rub off on some of the assistant coaches.

After this severely emotional and highly traumatizing event, I decided to take a step back and try to figure out who or what I was dealing with. I googled some of the character traits he exhibited during practices, and during our interactions. I wanted to understand on a deeper level how this type of antagonistic personality relied on people to feed his ego. The most important thing I learned during my autodidactic approach to understanding his behavior was that these types are completely disarmed when no one engages with them or pays attention to them. My approach changed. I no longer tried to work with him as I knew he got his thrills from trying to upset me. I also made it very clear that I would no longer meet with him or communicate with him on the phone or text without the presence of others. Since he proved to be a person that lacked integrity and had a problem telling the truth, I vowed to never put myself in a position to be turned on again. As a result, our interaction was extremely minimal. I even went so far as to seek out one of his staff members to communicate anything regarding the football team so we would remain on no contact at all times.

I'm sure my boss spoke to him regarding my 5-page report. Because nothing seemed to be done in the form of reprimand, in response to getting away with it he retaliated with even more vitriol. After the heat illness episode, there were two more back to back incidents that reinforced my approach to dealing with him, and several more throughout the 2017-2018 seasons However, ignoring him only heightened his passive-aggressive behavior. The first was hiding my cart so I had to search the campus as it was needed to perform my duties for the upcoming practice. Next, was sometime around Labor Day when he parked his vehicle right in front of the door to the AT facility where I normally park to load my cart before practice. He was completely out of control and yet to be held accountable for his actions. It became obvious I had to take drastic measures to protect myself: it was time to call my husband. Of course, this caused me significant anxiety but now that things had come to a head, it was my only recourse. I had now entered a truly slippery slope which I tried very hard to avoid because disclosing the true extent of the coach's harassment and mental distress I was suffering would infuriate him. I always knew if my husband saw one tear trinkle down my face, it would be over for the coach. I knew a phone call such as this would be the impetus for my husband to protect me at all cost, even if it meant settling this type of score in a more traditional manner between two men. Up to now, I truly believed I could handle the situation with the help of my supervisors but when my complaints fell on deaf ears and things started getting extremely personal, I needed a different kind of back up. Although I had shared with my husband most of the incidents that had taken place, I did not share the depth of my inner pain and emotional turmoil for fear that my husband would take matters into his own hands: Literally.

My husband is one of the strongest men I have ever known, mentally and physically. In fact, his strength (and ability to handle a strong woman) is still one of the things I admire about him. He reminds me so much of my Uncle William Sanders, who was also not one to be toyed with. I, being his wife was not to be mistreated by anyone, especially another man. With a background in martial arts, and strong as an ox, I tried my best to keep the coach from getting hurt and my husband from getting in trouble by minimizing the toil his behavior had taken on me. My husband has a different kind of love for me. He primary goal to make sure I was safe and well protected. Therefore, I was between a man who would give his life to fight for my safety and a coach who seemed to be bent on making my life miserable. For many on campus, to hear the rumors of the coach's indiscretions and knowing what my husband would do if he really knew, created even more inner stress for me. I took a picture of his vehicle nearly blocking my door and sent the photo to my husband who immediately called me for clarification of the photo and to tell me he was headed to the college. Although I was nervous, my husband assured me that he was very much in control of himself, and not to worry. My husband told me he caught him in the office and closed the door so he could have his undivided attention. He told me it got loud enough for the assistants to see if the coach was ok, but he did not tell me the extent of the conversation or what exactly was said but let's just say, the next day I sent him a photo of the coach's car that was parked pretty far away from my door.

Fortunately, the coach now understood I had a strong man in my corner who was ready and able to shut him down physically; I was now off limits. Unfortunately, for the football players, he turned his aggressions on to them. He turned up the heat in a way that surprised even me. There were times where he was completely unhinged, behaving like a two-year-old who wanted to throw himself onto the field when he couldn't have his way. I have never heard such profane, debasing language that was delivered to emasculate and cut to the core. He was quite aware that he had to tone it down during games because there were too many witnesses but only until he had the team alone in the privacy of the locker room. He continued to gaslight players. I could read the expressions on their faces which said, "I know he just cussed me out worse than anything in my life, but now he's acting so cool and friendly to me? Maybe it was my fault?" I witnessed this again and again and was sickened by the verbal abuse and what was nothing more than psychological manipulation, and emotional emasculation. On game and practice days most of the mentally tough student-athletes would ignore his edict and come to the AT clinic for treatment despite the threat of being punished. Many of them secretly told me that if I think what I hear on the field is bad, I wouldn't believe what he says to them in the meetings. It was not uncommon for him to keep them for hours longer than the CCCAA By Laws allowed. This was his way of bending their ears with his constant pressure for their loyalty, and the repeated assurance that they could get nowhere without him. The players also told me that he said the "people up top" don't care about them, or have their best interest at heart, only he was their salvation. The only part in all they told me that held any truth was, if they wanted to play in games for LASC or have the opportunity to earn a scholarship to the next level they had to do what he said.

My husband encouraged me to keep my distance but to let him know if I had any more problems with him. Each and every day was increasingly more difficult to sit on my cart and listen to the verbal abuse inflicted onto the players. I literally felt like a woman who was in an abusive relationship, whose abuser was also abusing the children. I was later introduced to the terms "Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma" which are conditions characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion similar to what law enforcement officers, emergency first responders, and fire fighters experience. A condition that often leads to them taking their own lives. Not that I was ever suicidal, I have too much love from my husband church and family. But my self-worth was diminishing daily. At that point I had close to 32 years of professional AT experience but the coach had me feeling like a HS water girl. Whether one is getting physically or emotionally abused, the brain does not recognize the difference between the two. Visible wounds get the attention while invisible wounds often go unnoticed. The trauma is processed the same way and will ultimately effect ones mental and physical well-being. Along with my faith, it was my husband who kept me going. He showered me with love, made me laugh, and gave me the emotional support I needed to get up the next morning. I began to have a full understanding of domestic violence. Why women stay in abusive relationships involving psychological manipulation and devaluing that makes them feel worthless. Somehow, a belief that they deserve to be treated in such a way. I saw it in the players and tried my best counsel those who were willing to talk to me in how to cope with the situation. Others, would either quit the team, get kicked off or be challenged to a fight by the head coach. It almost became routine for him to kick off anyone he couldn't control. The unfunny joke of the team soon became that, after he kicked someone off that was an asset to the team, they would be there the next day because he would call them that night to apologize and beg them to come back.

**After Effects**

Although I started seeing subtle changes in myself, I put my struggles aside to stay mentally strong for the football players. I was the only one who understood first-hand what they were going through and which put me in the eye of the storm. I knew I had a responsibility to help them cope with the situation. Many would either quit the team, get kicked off, or be challenged to a fist fight by this head coach. He was so oblivious to his own dysfunctional behavior, he would act like this in front of everyone. Everyone included, his coaching staff, our department auxiliary staff and my athletic training students. Good coaches figure out what makes an athlete tick and figures out how to get into their head to get them to do what is right for the team. This coach routinely kicked anyone off the team that he couldn’t control. Twice he kicked players off the team at an away game and told them to find their own way home.

Moving into October 2017, it was pre-season physical exam time. No surprise, the weight of the coach's heavy hand manifested itself once again. My general practitioner, Dr. James Zamora and I had been associates in the world of sports medicine for nearly 20 years. He completed a Fellowship program with our team physician, Dr. Keith Feder making him a bona fide sports medicine physician. For the past five years we would exchange information on sports medicine issues and shoot the breeze about health and fitness. We had much in common as he was an avid triathlete who competed in the Iron Man and I was a cycler with a penchant for reverse triathlons.

My appointment consisted of a brief "check-up" and lab test which was a sufficient once over until the next year. This time was different, he perceived a lack of spirit on my part which was usually jovial and upbeat. Sensing that I wasn’t ok, he asked what’s wrong to which I burst into tears. I felt ashamed that I lost it in front of him but also felt I was on the brink of mental break down. I described the six months of my work life the stress associated with it. Through my tears I described my situation in great detail. I told him I was having difficulty sleeping, was feeling on edge, and consistently had an abnormal increase in my resting heart rate. He asked if he could give me an assessment. After completing the questionnaire, he told me that I scored high on the scale for depression and anxiety. He referred me to the Behavioral Health Department for counseling. He then told me he would give me a few days off of work and would like to prescribe medication for sleep and anxiety.

I knew I was not on the top of my game at work or teaching so I accepted the week off and the counseling but declined the medication. I figured that since I was a health care professional I could exercise and eat better to manage my stress levels. I would stimulate the naturally occurring neurotransmitters on my own, the God given medicine cabinet housed in my brain. In my mind, resorting to medication was a form of defeat and that wasn’t going to happen. I was scheduled for counseling with a licensed marriage and family therapist for 3 or 4 consecutive weeks. I also participated in a group therapy a few times but soon lost interest because I thought members of the group had far more severe issues than myself. I also already knew I had the traits of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue and was too stressed out with my own issues to listen to anyone else's problems. I remembered what my friend Crystel Coleman and I used to joke about years ago when we needed each other's help. Jokingly, we would tell each other, "I got my own problems!" Thankfully, I had a support system of friends and family that held me up over the years, especially my sisters, Crystel, Yvette, Sherry, LaVenia, Krista, Lynn, Paula, Aunt Ann, Avis, Adrienne, and Danielle. Their counsel and prayers was often the oxygen I needed to get to the next day.

As time went on, things only got worse. Basketball was now in season and the football coach acted like he had some exclusive right to our services. In his mind, football was more important, demonstrating no respect for the basketball teams or coaches. In fact, prior to the official start of basketball season, he tried to prevent the female basketball players from using the track and weight room. Their pre-season conditioning program needed access to both which he vigorously tried to make off limits. A former football player even told me the coach said he didn't want those B-----s in his weight room.

My husband advised me to stay out of that business and let the women's basketball coach, Coach Dillard, fight that battle. This caused the VP to send out another memo to the athletics department staff, "lecturing all of us" on our need to get along with one another and share the facilities. Once again consistent lack of leadership by not disciplining the coach for his sexist, obnoxious behavior. We never had an issue prior to the hiring of this the football coach, but now with the constant quarreling, new policies had to be implemented on a regular basis.

Practices and games were filled with the same drama daily but reached a new level of dysfunction the day we played LA Pierce College. He publicly unleashed his anger on a player in the fourth quarter while we were in a great position to win the game. A freshman, offensive lineman got a penalty causing us to lose the ball. The coach ran onto the field to meet the player coming to the sideline, grabbing him by the facemask and scolding him that he just cost us the game. He literally pulled him off the field by his face mask and forcing him to the ground, straddled him cursed him out in plain view.

I was used to his outbursts and abuse but what happened next even surprised me. In front of the entire team and spectators, as he straddled him he told him to stay on the ground like a dog until I tell you to get up. There are rules in football about grabbing a player's face mask. It can put great strain on the neck so I went to the player in my best athletic trainers’ posture to check on him. He told me he was fine but I wasn’t. I told him to get up, that he didn't have to stay on the ground like a dog. The boy had just turned 18 a couple of weeks earlier. He cried tears of anger and went and sat on the bench by himself. I replay that scene in my mind till this day and revisit the empathy I had on that kid and the wrath I had for that coach on that day.

About five minutes later, the coach had the nerve to walk over to him on the bench saying with a smile, "You good? It's football man!" You don’t have to be Sigmund Freud to see this guy is unhinged. One minute he's equating this kid to a dog and the next he's checking to make sure he was ok. I doubt he checked on the kid because he cared to see if he was ok. He lost it in front of people and knew it and was doing damage control. I heard there were parents from the Pierce College sideline that were repulsed and assumed the kid's parents must not have been there because they would never allow their child to be treated in that manner. The few spectators that were there to support our team were used to it but by Monday, all over campus and in the local community the talk of the town was how the coach assaulted a player and didn't suffer any consequences because the incident was not captured on the film.

By now football season was winding down to our last Saturday home game in early November. That was good news for my staff but I began to lose my inner peace, slipping into a state of hyper-vigilance. Both basketball teams practiced in the Fitness and Wellness Center that is quite a distance from the football stadium. The women's team practiced late into the night which for the first time in 10 years made me concerned for my personal safety. After that last football game, here was a sense of relief for myself and my staff that although we were scathed, we made finally made it through.

I was so eager to start fresh with the new teams. It was as if there was so much bad energy in that football facility that it needed to be cleansed, so that’s what we did. While I still had the help of my staff, we cleaned the facility and packed up our supplies and equipment and kissed the Fieldhouse goodbye until we had to return for 2018 spring conditioning.

Athletes have breaks between their seasons but athletic trainers don’t. One sport follows another and most times they overlap. Our last football game was on Saturday and on Monday, I reported to the AT clinic ready to work with our basketball team. That was my first day since spring that I didn’t have to deal with that football coach. I felt like I had been mentally beat up that whole time from when he started in the spring to November. I soon realized that instead of being elated and happy to be free of the emotional grind we had all endured, I was struggling to get a grip on my emotions. Something strange had come over me, I couldn't stop crying while I was at work. I’m typically not the crying type and never at work. The only time I remember crying at work was when back at CSUDH 30 years ago, one of our volleyball players that I had worked closely with died in her sleep.

I owe a lot to our basketball coaches who truly understood what I was up against. One day in 2017, the head women's coach Lynette Dillard caught me before practice when the AT clinic was empty. Sensing my emotions, she asked, what’s wrong? Which automatically turned on the water works. Knowing what we both had been through with the football coach, she then asked, "I thought football was over?" As I proceeded to answer her question, I couldn't really put my finger on the reason for my tears. Yes, football was over, and I was thankful I didn't have to deal with the coach for several months down the line but something internally was off kilter.

I felt like a first responder giving someone CPR, who in the midst of a crisis had to keep their composure and emotions in check until the situation was turned over to the paramedics. Then they could fall apart emotionally. I was that first responder who was literally falling apart before my own eyes. Coach Dillard told me it sounded like I need to take some time off. I knew she was "tournament season” and I was determined to forge ahead until basketball season ended in March 2018.

Soon I found myself overwhelmed with the issues of life. Over the next couple of years, the basketball coaches, Coach Kyles, Coach Laurent, Coach Dillard, Coach Booker and Coach Devyn knew and felt my pain. They understood my burden and did all they could to support me. They were totally cool the day a huge, black rash broke out on my back and I couldn't come to work, and another day when I woke up with my eye swollen shut and I had to call off again. All because of ongoing stress. I was literally breaking down but they never once complained to my boss and I feel indebted to them for helping me through.

It was especially tough while teaching at CSUDH. Whenever I had to discuss sports medicine issues in class like the management of heat illnesses, I would have flashbacks of that fateful day back in August, trying to save our football player from heatstroke. Or worse, lecturing on the emerging topic of, "Abuse of Power and Toxic Coaching in Sports.” It became more and more difficult to stay focused without those intruding thoughts filling my mind. Trying to remain objective without bringing my very present subjective, personal, experiences to the discussion. At times I would literally have to talk to myself, saying, "You better not run out of this classroom crying! You are stronger than that!" All the while not missing a beat as the lecture flowed off my tongue while fighting my inner conflict. The next week at LASC, I was taping one of the women's basketball players when she said, "What's wrong Mrs. Willda? You're not the same." I just played it off and told her I was good but that was when it became real that I was doing a poor job of hiding my problems and I needed help.

I texted Crystel who has stood by my side during other issues of life. We had not spoken in several months which was highly unusual for us. It was my fault as a result of my workplace stress causing me to shrink back from most people in my personal life. I was disappointed in the lack of support from LASC and the district which caused my tolerance and love of people to wane. This was uncharacteristic for me and in stark contrast from the people person I've always been. It was easier to stop going to church and hanging out with people in order to maintain my sensibilities. I alienated myself, from the world and only came into contact with people on my jobs at CSUDH and LASC. For a long time, I put up a good front for the students. For the most part, I just wanted to be alone, finding my peace and solace in my husband and in Jesus.

I told Crystel most of the details of my workplace stress and how the coach's mind games had me feeling like a high school water girl. So much so that I was losing all confidence and didn't even know who I was any more. Crystel took over the conversation to affirm me in a way that reminded me who I was in Christ. She told me I was a child of God, a daughter of the King, an heir of the throne, more than a conqueror!! We ended the conversation with me feeling encouraged, uplifted, and hopeful. My next stop was to the office of my boss, Dr. Mike Ernst who was the Kinesiology Department Chair at CSUDH. Dr. Ernst and I went way back 25 years or so. We met when I was one of his undergraduate professors when he first started his college career at CSUDH. He knew me well, so when I asked if I could meet with him, he suspected it was serious because of my voice and tone. In all the years we had known each other he never saw the frailty I displayed that day.

Following one's calling often comes with a high price but not at the cost of my mental health. I was completely vulnerable, and I told him I was contemplating taking a stress disability from LASC. I needed to inform him of my emotional decline because it was now affecting my performance in the classroom. Whenever I told the story, I would burst into tears causing me to feel embarrassed by my weakness. I didn't think I could handle my teaching position any longer; and wasn't even sure if I could last until the semester ended in December. I told him I wanted to forewarn him just in case something terrible happened and I had an emotional breakdown in the classroom. I told him I was experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, worthlessness and that my confidence had been shattered over time.

After quietly listening to me and taking it all in, Dr. Ernst began to speak. He was loved by my colleagues in the department and our kinesiology students but I never knew what a tremendous counselor he was until it was my turn. Although he had been my colleague for many years, and my boss for the last few, I considered this a divine appointment and a gift from God. I listened attentively soaking up every word as he spoke from his heart. In God's providence, Dr. Ernst’s words of exhortation reverberated in my soul. This was definitely the confirmation that God was in the midst, because he echoed similar sentiments Crystel exclaimed only days earlier. He ended by saying, "Yes!!! Willda, you need to take time off so you can remember who you are!" He went on to say, "You are a new creation. You are born again. Made in His image. You are a daughter of the Creator of the universe. You are loved beyond understanding. Fearfully and wonderfully made! Inheritor of the throne!!!" I left Dr. Ernst feeling more empowered than I had in a very long time. I knew I had to "Gird up the Loins of my mind," (1Peter 1:13) and do what it took to recover. I was confident enough to make it through the semester but that soon waned when football started up again. Dr. Scott Cheatham, associate professor in the kinesiology department, is another of my long-time friend and colleague. He would always stop to ask how I was doing. He gave me advice whenever I asked for it or just listened to me vent my woes still occurring at LASC. Other Colleagues I must mention are Mary Aja, Brian Cable, and Maria Castro who all had listening ears when I needed them most. People don't often realize the role they play in helping others maintain their sanity. They have no idea how much just listening to me helped.

I eventually contacted Dr. Zamora's office for an appointment the day before Thanksgiving. I told him things had gotten worse and I couldn't shake the feelings of defeat since I had let down football players. I also told him I had trouble concentrating and remembering information I normally knew like the back of my hand. Lastly, I told Dr. Zamora that my low spirit was noticed by the LASC student-athletes which made matters worse for me emotionally. I told him I was an emotional wreck that was unable to sleep, I was using food as a crutch and I was having what seemed to be heart palpitations. I asked for some additional days off of work and agreed to go medication. He explained to me the physical and mental effects of trauma. We talked about the role stress plays on the nervous system causing one to constantly be in fight or flight mode which ultimately leads to the physical breakdown of the body. He went on to say that in my case the depression, insomnia and anxiety were the physical manifestations of chronic stress. He said he could only give me five days off of work and gave me a prescription for two Psychotropic medications. He also referred me back to Kaiser Permanente's Behavioral Health Department, with a psychiatrist who would take over the management of my meds, and mental health issues. It bothered me to think that so many football players would have lifelong, unresolved mental issues related to their experiences with the LASC football teams between 2017-2018. I personally was blessed to have good insurance, but they would be left to their own devices due to a lack of affordable health care.

In the meantime, business was still going strong for TAPE PROS, but I was out of the loop. If it weren't for Alonzo Green, Lesley Brown, and Dr. Alejandra Merriman surely, my company would have gone under after nearly 25 years in business. They handled the system of healthcare management and administrative duties I once took care of and kept things afloat until I improved. There were so many young professionals I am grateful for who banded together in my absence, and I can't thank them enough. However, it was extremely difficult to come to grips that I was going to be taking meds for my mental state. Pride definitely got in the way as I felt that was for weak people. But soon, I convinced myself that if I had a broken bone I would seek out medical attention to fix the bone. Since my brain was broken, why not seek out remedies to fix it? I started taking the medication the night before Thanksgiving and didn't wake up until 5:00 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day. I commend Dr. Zamora for his chair side manner. He went above and beyond to counsel me and provide the appropriate diagnosis and proper referral. I cannot say enough about the love and support of my husband who never complained, not even about eating fast food on Thanksgiving Day. All he was concerned with was that I rested well and got better.

It was now November, the stress was still paramount and I really needed to get away from the work that was causing it. But before taking my leave of absence, I wanted to try one more time to get the LASC administrators to hear my voice. As a mandated reporter, it was my duty to report the coach's treatment of the team, especially since we had several minors that wouldn't turn 18 until the late fall. Not only was their physical health and safety at risk but also their mental health and safety. Sadly, due to my previous reports being ignored, we ended up with at least four players diagnosed with serious mental health issues from outside providers. Their issues were all directly attributed to the stress and abusive treatment inflicted on them by the head coach. I learned later that there were more after a 2018 internal investigation into my allegations was completed.

I decided to take the CSULB administrator's advice and reach out to the interim president's personal assistant to request she schedule a meeting with the president before her term ended in the summer of 2018. After going back and forth via email, the interim president agreed to meet me in mid-November. Prior to the meeting I was completely as transparent, especially about our athlete's being at risk. I sent her an email describing the situation and the mental health issues in question, including my own. I remained hopeful that someone would finally act on behalf of our student-athletes. To my surprise, she was quite cold, matter of fact and aloof. As a dedicated employee of the college for the last 10 years along with the crap I had gone through with the coach over the last 8 months, I expected much more. From the get-go, I got the impression she was irritated with me. The first thing she told me was she had cancelled our scheduled meeting and was surprised I would just "show up." I told her I was not informed that the meeting was canceled. Without much of a greeting she directed me to take a seat. She went on to tell me that she had just finished forwarding my email to the LACCD's Vice Chancellor of HR. That would be at least his fourth time being made aware of the coach's reckless behavior and utter disregard for the LACCD's student-athletes and myself. Unfortunately, this was still not enough to cause even the district's Vice Chancellor of Human Resources to intervene.

The interim president didn't give me the opportunity to address the actions of the football coach at all. Whenever I tried, she switched the subject to the mental health issues I mentioned in the email. Although that was important, I felt the coach's behavior was the root of the problem and should've been addressed. Especially since she told me she had a master's degree in counseling. Of all people, she should have understood and acted. I told her that I didn't want to let the basketball teams down and would try to wait till the end of the season before taking a leave of absence. The more I tried to bring up the coach's behavior, the more she made her main focus to tell me that I needed to take care of myself. To me this was just a perfunctory duty that she checked off the list to cover herself. She also suggested I contact the district's "Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for help. She said I shouldn't "take one for the team" I should go ahead and take the leave of absence and they would take care of finding a sub. The last and final time I brought up the coach, her response was astounding. With a smug attitude she said, "Well someone filed a complaint against you too! I don't know if they're planning to file a lawsuit but they want money!" She then let me know that I should be hearing from human resources about the matter soon.

I was floored to say the least. The meeting ended right after that news and I left feeling even more hopeless. If our own president has such a strong background in student services and holds a doctorate in administration but still won't intervene, who will? Racking my brain trying to figure out who would have filed a complaint against me, the only incident I could think of was the heat illness back in the summer. I was confused because that very patient texted me to thank me for saving his life. Something didn't feel right. I did take her advice and contacted the EAP, but after exhausting all efforts to find a therapist, I continued to meet with the Kaiser Behavioral Health professionals.

I was still baffled by the president's lack of emotion and solemn disposition, wondering what she had against me? Knowing what had been going on, she had such a flat affect it made me conclude she was either a "Mean Girl" or was the victim of "Mean Girls" growing up. There is this concept that explains the difference between how girls and boys are socialized as children, especially on the playground. Since girls have the need to have a level playing field at all times growing up, it later translates to the workplace as "covert bullying" and jealousy when one female seems to be doing better than others. Hence why women often get labeled as always having drama, or "not being able to get along in the office or workplace setting." I also thought it could have been the age-old concept that often occurs in the black community: The "Crab Syndrome." Picture a bucket of crabs stepping all over each other trying to climb out of the bucket. Every time one crab reaches the top, another crab reaches up to pull them back down with the rest of them. Either way, I expected her to at least empathize with my situation, but her behavior towards me was as if she was annoyed that I interrupted her morning. Her lack of intervention was a failure to protect the district's employee and the students she was hired to serve.

Over the next few weeks, I waited for our campus HR or the LACCD's HR department to contact me which caused me even more anxiety. Just knowing there was the possibility I would be named in a lawsuit put salt on an already open wound. Recently I ran across a "Professional Speaker Series" in which the president was sharing her journey with a group of educators and students. At the time she held a position as the Vice Chancellor of Student Services for the California Community College System. This event took place in 2015 before she started at LASC. She spoke about multiple aspects of student success. She spoke of the importance of having people who support you, closing achievement gaps and she used young black men as an example, what makes a good leader, the student centered approach, the need to be better at what we do, the importance of people seeing something in you that you don't often see in yourself. Frankly, I was appalled at the hypocrisy. When she got to LASC she must have forgotten who "she" was! There she stood on her soapbox spewing all this great support for students in that 2015 video, but now when the students needed her the most, she turned a blind eye and let them suffer. As one person told me, "If she didn't know what was going on down at the football stadium Fieldhouse she wasn't a good president. And, if she knew what was going on and did not intervene, she wasn't a good president." All those things she spoke on sounded great. I learned a long time ago that talk is cheap. It's what you do that makes a difference. Maybe we didn't measure up to the new colleges with beautiful campuses that she was used to but, we still mattered!

My first meeting with the psychiatrist let me know I wouldn't be meeting with him for very long. His main job was to manage my medication and solicit a brief update on whether they were helping my symptoms. I wanted action. A solution other than bemoaning my problems so I could get back to work. However, he did give me some hope by stating that I was in a unique position because I was able to work in a different facility away from my aggressor. This was unlike most of his patients with workplace stress who are stuck in their situation year-round causing them to never want to return to their jobs. Since it was clear I wanted to go back to work he enrolled me in a "return to work program" which required more group therapy, five days per week for a month. When mid-December came around I was finally able to procure my subs (even though the president said they would take care of it) so I could begin my stress disability and group therapy. The Kaiser Behavioral Health Clinic would not certify completion of the program unless you attended every meeting so I made sure I complied. Although the participants were a room full of stressed out people whose jobs were getting the best of them, I really enjoyed the content of the counseling taught in the group sessions. The emphasis was on helping the employees/patients return to work equipped with new skills that would allow them to approach work from a different perspective. Self-care, work-life balance, and mindfulness were the main stays of the program. This was a novel concept to me because I never thought of anything more than serving our students with every ounce I had to give. I suppose that is why professional burnout is common in the field of athletic training since most of us have the same mindset. Especially for those 40 and over, who didn't get the message that today's young professionals are taught-- work life balance. I had no idea what that was until I attended the group therapy sessions at Kaiser. It was a great program! I took copious notes and at the end of the program I was armed and ready to return.

In mid-January of 2018 I was back at work, fortified with a new skill set, self-care! For the first time, I started to take regular lunch breaks between teaching classes at CSUDH and my job at LASC. I started relaxing more, getting my nails and toes done on a regular basis, my hair done more frequently than ever and occasionally inviting friends and family to "Massage Envy" for an outing of relaxation and fellowship around lunch. One day I was looking at Face Book and a friend from church created a post that really struck a chord. This is what she posted: "Been thinking, I hear so much today about self-care. Know what's better than self-care? Soul-care. Time alone with God for confession, forgiveness, submission and worship. It heals better than all the things we try to comfort ourselves with." Her words encouraged me to cast my anxiety onto God and rethink my approach to healing. I was also reminded that this battle was not mine it was the Lord's. I was no longer in a battle with the coach, I was in a battle for my mental health and emotional stability. I knew I had to change my mindset and put on the full armor of God so I could continue to stand. With the 2018 season coming up without any disciplinary actions or reason to change his behavior, I would not be able to stand alone! I continued meeting with the psychiatrist and counselor who both gave me some valuable nuggets and insight about myself. One of my questions was why did I care so much? The psychiatrist told me that it's ok to care but learn to care about the truly important things and let the other stuff go. It was a light bulb moment, but actually something I heard repeatedly from my husband.

By now the interim president's term was up and she had taken another appointment at a sister college in our district leaving me and the football players to fend for ourselves. On the first day of the official 2018 football practice I was severely alarmed. The old proverb "It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back" rang true when I saw the same player who had the medical crisis back in August of 2017, dressed in full gear and headed to the football field. He was not present at the team physicals provided by LACS's sports medicine team and I had an inkling he never had a pre-participation exam (PPE). The seriousness of his condition should have required him to have numerous follow-ups and a complete work-up by an outside specialist before being cleared to participate. When I asked for his documents he confessed that he hadn't yet been cleared. This was truly the last straw!!! I took his helmet and immediately told him to leave the field and went on to report this misconduct on the part of the coaching staff. The report included the citing of the CCCAA by law that all student-athletes must have a PPE before being allowed to participate with their perspective teams, on any level.

Even though it was clear to me that filing the lawsuit could potentially help defuse the situation, I still struggled with the thought of suing my employer, especially since I had every intention to continue working. One day, I attended the 10th anniversary celebration of a couple from my church. I sat at the same table as my Pastor, Anthony Kidd. Since he knew about my work issues, I sought out his counsel. I asked him point blank, what he thought of me filing suit against the coach, interim president, and the LACCD. He said that since I exhausted all efforts to peacefully right the wrongs that I witnessed and experienced without resolution, I had no choice but to go forward with legal action. He went on to say, men like this need to be stopped and people in positions of power should be held accountable for allowing this to happen. Emboldened with my pastor's counsel and support, I pressed on not only in pursuit of justice but also with the hope that this would bring an end to the adversity inflicted upon us.

For years I was I was used to operating on the old model that no one is issued athletic equipment or team gear until they were official cleared by having all documents in order including proof of their PPE. The athletic department administrator's new system was broken to say the least. Leaving me to be the enforcer, I had to pull several other players off the field over the next few days for noncompliance with PPEs. Thinking he was above the law, the head coach continued to have no regard for standard rules and policies. He allowed gear to be distributed at will.

I said to myself, so this is what the preverbal last straw looks like. It was now crystal clear that there would be no getting through to the coach and the athletic administrators only action was to tell me to "keep documenting." Although we had a newly appointed acting AD, the VP of student affairs remained because the coach was so problematic the previous season. Knowing that things were not going to change, my only recourse was to hire an attorney at law. In my mind, filing a lawsuit was the only way I could protect myself from another disastrous season at the hands of this coach. His behavior was becoming increasingly detrimental to the physical and mental well-being of all of us. I truly felt someone’s life could be at stake. MLK once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I was now compelled to double-down and do my part in bringing justice to this situation.

A few weeks later we started playing our games and the season continued with much of the same nonsense. This time he seemed to really cross the line with player health and safety causing me to clean up his messes since it was my job to respond to the medical all medical crisis'. The coach's warped sense of humanity and abuse of power was strengthened every time he got away with something. There was one point in the season that I found out the complaint the interim president told me about actually did come from the player I purportedly saved because other football players told me he would talk about it at school saying I caused his medical condition because I left him in the whirlpool too long. They told me they jammed him up asking him "how could you turn on Miss Willda of all people?"

There is no doubt in my mind that his situation was handled appropriately. Unfortunately, in the spring of 2018 a football player named Jordan McNair who was a freshman at the University of Maryland, College Park died of heatstroke. There was an extensive investigation by an outside agency that found the athletic training staff did not use best practices. This athlete was showing signs of distress during the post practice conditioning run and was not even transported to the ER until an hour later. The standard of care is to "cool first, then transport." Because they never put Jordan in the cold whirlpool to bring down his core temperature, sadly, he ended up dying from kidney failure secondary to heat stroke. The University of Maryland's president took both legal and moral responsibility and it was said that the settlement talks were upwards of $30 million. Ten million for each parent, and ten million on behalf of the decedent. My actions not only saved the athlete's life according to the treating ER physician but saved the LACCD millions of dollars had he not survived. Even though our interim president had seven months on her contract before taking another position within the district, she chose to stick her head in the sand and force me to navigate this treatment without administrative intervention.

Once the new president was hired I was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. I could not fathom regurgitating the past events to bring her up to speed. I chose to let the people around her do that. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigator required the district to answer the charges filed on my behalf and it was only a few months later that she received the report that outlined the full scope and scale of the investigation. In essence, the LACCD Office for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion substantiated my allegations of gender discrimination, unlawful harassment, retaliation, hostile work environment, and interference with my job performance. I might add that I didn't receive the results of the investigation until 2019 and was never given a chance to respond to his claims or inform them of worsened behavior during the 2018 season while he was allowed to respond to my complaint in 2018. I cannot comment on many of the specific incidences that occurred throughout the 2018 season because of pending litigation and my trial set for July 2021. However, the retaliation increased tenfold. This time the coach played with the football player's lives trying to step as close to the line as possible knowing I wouldn't have their blood on my hands and would do everything in my power to intervene by constantly cleaning up his mess. Yet, still nothing changed.

There was one week during the season where there were three incidents over a period of five days due to the coach's outrageous conduct. By then it was becoming a joke. On one of the incidents we had to call the athletes parents to transport him to the ER. A couple of nights later, while running sprints the team was denied water by the coach. They had been running a lot of sprints and started to look distressed so my AT student and I started placing water cages on the sideline so they could get some when they were done. All of a sudden the coach started yelling at us "no water!" I recall my AT student from CSULB asking me what we do when the coach is yelling "no water?" I told her that we have to do our job and make the water available which we did by placing the water on the sideline despite the coach barking at us and the players denying them to drink. I went on to tell her, if he does not allow them to drink it, that's on him. Not too long after we got our equipment and supplies loaded up and were in the AT facility, someone said a football player was down in the locker room. Per HIPAA laws I cannot divulge his condition but the VP did meet me at the emergency room that night. I told him what happened and asked him, "Does someone really have to die?" He had the same response. "Keep documenting," which soon became the mantra of the new acting AD as well.

The next day, I began having sharp chest pains. I didn't think I was having a heart attack but they were so sharp, I didn’t take any chances and called Dr. Zamora's office. This was on Thursday so I contacted my boss to tell him I was leaving work and headed to Kaiser. I told him I was so sick of everything and didn't know if I were going to show up for the game on Saturday or not. After arriving at Dr. Zamora's office, he evaluated me and knowing my history of work stress at the hands of this coach, he decided it was not a heart attack but a symptom of my increasing anxiety. He prescribed Valium and an emergency leave for another five days off of work. Even after all this the only thing the administrators told me with consistency was "keep documenting until we get enough on him." There was even a time I asked my boss "What do you want from me? Are you trying to help drive me crazy? I even told him that the only reason I'm not quitting is because I've worked too long to walk away. I was also too young to get maximum benefits so I had no choice but to stay. I honestly think he felt very bad but all he could say before the interim president left for her next assignment, his hands were tied. Because they didn't discipline the coach earlier, it was too late. I believe at that point they were worried about unlawful termination.

Mid-way through the season the new president offered to meet with the coach and me but I respectfully declined. The season was nearing its end and I saw no point in meeting with her and the administrators for a one-hour meeting that would accomplish nothing. I was tired of meetings. I had already met with so many different entities, including the campus Title IX representative several times, union reps, the compliance officer from the LACCD Office for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; the EEOC, my lawyer and multiple mental health professionals. I was tired. I didn't want to waste another second listening to him brag about himself, how much the young men needed him and what an impact he was making on their lives. It was nauseating and I refused to indulge in his foolishness and disrespect any longer. After those three emergency incidents in one week another one occurred that is worth of mentioning. One Saturday it was about 90 degrees and the coach got the bright idea to tell the offensive lineman not to take off their hats (helmets) until we scored. I couldn't believe what I was hearing especially since the offensive linemen are the largest guys on the team that overheat the fastest. Again, constantly interfering with my ability to do my job, we couldn't even cool them down with ice towels because they weren't allowed remove their helmets until they scored. He had a couple of women on his staff of which one who happened to be a lawyer. I called them "alibi women" that he allowed to be around the team to do his administrative work and to be his alibi in case he was accused of misogyny. Sure enough, in the investigation report he stated that he doesn't have issues with women and even has them on his staff. He even went on to tell the investigator that he once had all women assistant coaches. From my assessment this woman wasn't really an active coach but more of a glorified statistician. After a few series of not being able to remove their helmets I politely walked over to her and said, "I don't know what kind of lawyer you are but unless you want to be sued along with the head coach you need to tell him that if someone suffers from a heat illness because of his actions you're all going to be held liable. I saw her go over and whisper something to him and the next thing you know he was yelling "take off your hats, take off your hats."

As his behavior became more and more toxic, I became even more fearful and hyper-vigilant. My brother had given me a taser which I requested permission from the sheriff's department, and the president to carry on campus. I had read somewhere that it was illegal to carry a concealed taser in California but on a college or university campus you could if the president or chancellor granted you permission. The president denied my request which is probably good because I probably would have tased the mess out of him by now! She did approve pepper spray which I thought was useless. So, I asked my husband to buy me a gun and take me to the shooting range so I could at least feel safe at home. He also got cameras installed around our home. Not long after that I waved the white flag and told my boss and the president that I surrender. Since the coach is so bothered by having me in his domain then they could just hire a man and I would stay up in the Fitness and Wellness Clinic and work with the basketball teams. That led to the last meeting with the coach, my boss, the new acting AD, and another administrator. The VP opened up by telling everyone the purpose of the meeting is because I no longer feel safe in the football environment. Nothing changed, and the meeting ended up with me walking out as a shouting match between the VP and the coach ensued. He found me and took me into another office to tell me I needed to be strong and keep holding on. He asked me to come back to the meeting. I gathered myself and we concluded the meeting to no avail. By the time the president got back to me about the accommodations I requested, I told her there was only one game left so I would just finish the season.

One night after a basketball game, I went to the Fieldhouse to retrieve something I needed and found my keys to the AT facility did not work. I was outraged! I immediately called my boss and asked who authorized the locks to be changed in a facility that I work in? He was not aware of the situation and said he would call the president immediately. Apparently the coach had the locks changed. I was locked out! By now, I suppose they had enough of him and shut down the Fieldhouse. I was outraged when I saw he and his assistants had been relocated to the Fitness and Wellness Center. I asked the VP how he could relocate him to our peaceful building. A few days later on February 7th an edict came from the district office to finally fire him after two years of unprofessional behavior. He was escorted off the campus by the Sheriff station. He had violated so many policies and broken so many rules by then that they relieved him of his duties and escorted him and his assistants off the campus. There was a basketball game that night for which I had never seen so many campus sheriff vehicles parked outside the AT clinic or deputies serving as security for the game. For the first time in a long time, I felt safe.

The year 2019 was bizarre to say the least. By now my attorney was gaining traction within the legal system and the case was moving along. My much-anticipated trial was scheduled. Unfortunately, two very much anticipated trial dates (August and December 2020) were cancelled due to the pandemic and subsequent court closures. We have rescheduled for the third time to July 2021, I can't believe I finally get to have my day in court! Even though I was looking forward to putting all this all behind me in 2020, I learned to put everything, including this, in God's Hand s knowing and trusting that He is in control. I learned to stop fretting when things didn't go according to my plans. In actuality, there were some things that came out of the delay that could not have happened if the courts didn't close. It was supposed to be the year my husband and I could finally take a deep breath and put the pieces of our lives back together. Truly, love and trust in God was the glue that kept us together. Things seemed to be okay, but there was something that just wasn't right with me. Although the coach was long gone by now, I was still having some personal issues that I couldn't get beyond. I thought I was ok, but it was at our annual California Community College Athletic Trainers Association (CCCATA South meeting) that an AT colleague, Junior Domingo, asked me if I was ok. Junior worked himself up in the ranks and is now a well-respected athletic director now. He was truly concerned about me because he was in the know about the conflict I had with this coach. It gave me pause to respond with the truth as tears welled in my eyes, "I'm not sure." He immediately told me to follow him and introduced me to a nice young lady named Kelsey Bains. Kelsey was a representative from district 8 for an organization called "ATs Care " which provides services to members of our national athletic training organization (NATA) who need assistance after traumatic events on the job. I gave her a brief summary of my situation and held my emotions. That night Kelsey reached out to check on me and over the next two weeks called and texted me, allowing me to express some feelings I didn't even know were still there. She walked me through the pain that had resurfaced and connected me with the national program director who was also very helpful. Speaking with the national office rep was the first time PTSD was introduced and gave me pause to wonder about some of the changes I noticed about myself.

I continued to have a hard time in class when I taught about subject matters that brought up memories of the 2017 & 2018 football seasons. I had near panic attacks whenever I would enter campus and drive pass the football field to get to the Fitness and Wellness Center. I couldn't even look down at the field while passing by. My hyper-vigilance continued and I would sometimes awake in the middle of the night seeing the coach's face or an image of him lurking in the corner of my dark bedroom. Since I was supposed to be beyond this, I did not share these experiences with my husband. I had taken him through enough and he needed a break. One day I was watching a video where they discussed the symptoms of PTSD explaining that it doesn't only occur to war veterans and people who have suffered severe trauma but can present itself in many other ways. The psychologist in the video talked about four major patterns of behavior especially when they all occur together. I was surprised that I had all four of the symptoms discussed. Intrusive thoughts (memories or nightmares of the event that pop into mind at the most inopportune time), avoidant behavior (things that reminded me of the trauma like laying my eyes on the football field), being on edge and hyper-vigilance (real and imagined fear), and negative thinking (the feeling of doom I started having thinking I was going to die of cancer related to female issues or a car accident).

It described what I was feeling to a tee but I never thought of the symptoms being the basis of PTSD. I knew I was still showing signs of depression, anxiety and insomnia but I felt guilty for still having these problems and didn't share this with my husband either even though he could see them. But I did reach out to my counselor via email. It was close to Christmas and we kept missing each other unable to connect until it was too late. The cumulative stress and emotional abuse finally caught up with me and I had a medical crisis in early January. This was the "wake-up call" I needed that changed my life putting me on the road to recovery. It forced me to snap out of it and realize what was truly important in life. I started eating better, walking five miles a few times a week and even got back on my bike with hopes of catching up with Coach Kevin and the Major Motion Recreational Cycling Club one day. It was time for me to change my identity and stop being the wounded victim who used emotional eating as an excuse to use food as a crutch. I believed the Bible to be my compass and the Lord to be my guide, pointing me back in the right direction. I stood on the promises of God claiming my identity and confidence in Him! I believed his promise that all things worked together, and something good was going to happen to me!

**Medical Crisis/Retirement**

On January 7th I was in the gym putting away supplies in the storage room. We were preparing for our bi-annual LACCD AT/Risk Management meeting the next day. Coach Kyles happened to walk over and ask how I was doing. I started telling him I couldn't attend their walk-through before the road game because I had to attend the meeting at the district office in downtown LA. I told him I was feeling sick to my stomach as I shared with him I was really anxious about going to the district office and the thought of it was making me sick. I remember him saying to me, "I can't believe your still dealing with the that!" That night my anxiety increased and I went to bed. Unfortunately, I ended up having a stroke in my sleep as a result of a severe spike in my blood pressure during the night. After getting discharged from the ER, over the next six days I saw about five different specialist and had an MRI. At one point I saw two specialists on

the same day. After the MRI, the neurologist confirmed the stroke and took me off work for three months. I met with Dr. Zamora who was shocked and took it upon himself to counsel me on the art of "letting things go.” Dr. Zamora then prescribed medication for hypertension and wished me well but not before admonishing me to start loving and taking better care of myself. He acknowledged how much my husband loves me and told me I needed to care more for myself too. He gave me some great advice that I should do something that I enjoyed that was just for me every day. It could be getting a massage, reading a book, not eating that piece of cake, stopping to smell the flowers. It was supposed to be something just for me. I took that advice and ran with it. By February, the family counselor from Kaiser Behavioral Health authorized visits for a trauma psychologist. I met with a woman that didn't impress me in the least bit. I didn't like her approach or quick diagnosis of me so I didn't go back. I also ended up having to give up my teaching position at CSUDH because of my health crisis, which was devastating, but necessary.

I contacted the company for some other names and ended up calling a gentleman on the list simply because I liked his name. Dr. Gordan St. Mary who ended up being the answer to my prays. He specialized in various forms of trauma and was perfect for treating my PTSD. He used "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy" (CBT) and believed strongly in Brain Science with specific interest in how chronic stress can change the brain chemistry. In particular, how the Amygdala and Hippocampus process trauma. Ne needed some background in order to understand my diagnosis which would eventually drive my treatment but he wasn't interested in hearing the long drawn out story with every painstaking detail. He was more interested in teaching me how to navigate the manifestations that could be attributed to long term stress and the impact it has on the brain. Because the brain can be rewired, his emphasis was on retraining my brain. His main message to me was that peace and anxiety cannot co-exist and he gave me tools, lessons, homework and assignments that would give me an active part in getting back to my old self. After that I doubled down and was determined to do my part to improve the health of my brain. I switched to a more anti-inflammatory/brain healthy diet and picked up additional fitness activities. Dr. St. Mary's advice to keep a gratitude journal was also critical in my recovery. When problems get us down, we often forget to look up and be grateful. Even though my mental health improved significantly by the things Dr. St. Mary taught me on brain science, he warned me that I may struggle with anxiety for the rest of my life. He counseled me that I would need to learn the triggers and to stop it in its tracks at the first signs.

Like the saying goes, my life journey has definitely been more than the sum of its parts. As I tried to walk in God's truth and grace, the calling that started back on Volutsia Street 58 years ago may have changed trajectory over time, but God remained the same. Over the course of my life I learned that Christ will accomplish His purposes and nothing can stop what He has called me to do, unto His glory! As 2021 unfolds and we all navigate this new world of uncertainty, I don't know what the future holds for me but I'm certain that God holds my future! I'm so thankful for the pastors in my life whom over the past 25 years have equipped and prepared me spiritually for such a time like this. I don't know where I'd be without my current pastors: Anthony Kidd, Bobby Scott, and Reaver Bingham, and my former pastor, Dr. Carl Hargrove. Because of their teaching over the years and my understanding of the sovereignty of God, I do not hold any grudges, resentment, or bitterness towards my employer because this was God's will. Jesus did this! He could have stopped it any time, but obviously trusted that I could endure it until one day He said, "Enough!"

In late 2020 God opened a door that I didn't see coming. Out of the blue, Dr. Ernst from CSUDH asked me if I wanted my old teaching position back! I was apprehensive because it was only a week before the fall semester was to begin and they had transitioned to remote learning. I was completely intimidated and my confidence in teaching was shaken since I had never taught on-line before. My initially reaction was to decline the position but I needed to think it through. I deliberated for a few hours and eventually realized, that it wasn’t about my confidence in teaching but my confidence in Christ. I put my faith in the Lord and accepted the position. I began this next journey by going through tutorials with a very kind lady, Stella Demas from the Academic Technology Department. She walked me though the ins and outs of getting my course set up and with her help, the semester went great! Soon after, LACCD offered their eligible employees a retirement incentive which I gladly accepted. I will be officially retired on June 30, 2021! I had planned to work many more years to maximize my retirement benefits but God made a way and pulled me out of this quagmire of despair I had sank into. It was a way to put all this behind me and walk into the next chapter of life in peace. God is truly able to do "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think!" (Ephesians 3:20). His promises are true! "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11)

Participating in this project for Gary Vitti's "Memoir on Women in Athletic Training" has been more than healing. To use Gary's word, it has been cathartic; the proverbial key that was needed to unleash my pain, lift my burden and finally slam this chapter of my life closed. With this, I was given the opportunity to tell my story in hopes that it may be used to prevent another woman from enduring this type of duress and bring to light the emerging, covert nature of gender discrimination and coaching abuse in the world of sports. Furthermore, it has been completely liberating to tell my unedited narrative of how the Lord brought me through. The greatest irony is what man tried to use to defeat me, God used for His glory and my good! He strengthened my faith and equipped me to trust Him on a deeper level, never letting go of my hand. By carrying me through the pain and suffering, God was true to His promise that He would never leave or forsake me. A great passage of scripture often came to mind in my darkest hours: "Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time, having cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you. Be sober of spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. So, resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brothers and sisters who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, an establish you." (1Peter 5:6-10).

I was initially frustrated by the COVID-19 court closures delaying the legal process but I knew it was in God’s hands. In fact, the delay gave more time for more aberrant behavior that reinforced the lawsuit. I don't know what the future holds and if justice will be served. I do know that participating in this project has been a sort of "poetic justice" that I needed for now. Only God knows the outcome and I trust His will. Although my suffering pales in comparison to so many who have been victims of a hostile workplace, I am proud to have fought in honor of those who came before me and those who will come after me.

Yesterday I received a random message from a young professional in the field, TaMesha Jefferson, one of many adopted nieces. After serving at Pepperdine University for five years as an assistant athletic trainer, she is in a doctorate program for psychology and just started her first year as an assistant athletic trainer at USC. I thought it would be apropos to share how much encouragement I have received through her words, which makes it all worth the while! "You are my go to when I need advice...you are my inspiration...you have taught me so much...you are the reason I became an athletic trainer...you have accomplished so much and overcame obstacles in your career...you instilled the courage in me to become the strong, black, female athletic trainer in a career that is so dominated by men! Thank you for all that you have done for me and are still doing for me! If I'm even half the woman you are, I'm gonna be in great shape! I love you Aunt Willda!!" TaMesha's words of affirmation help to make everything me, and every other female athletic trainer who paved the way for her and so many other young women in the world of sports medicine worth every tear we cried. In closing, the next time I see my psychologist, Dr. St. Mary, I plan to tell him how gratifying it was to participate in this project, then with all due respect, relieve him of his services. I can truly quote the words of one of my favorite sweatshirts I recently purchased, "I don't need therapy, I just need to ride my bike!"