

Fig Tree Stories: Elder Tales

“Our Seeds of Wisdom”



A project of Mending Spirit,
Art for Healing

Facilitated by Renie Campbell & D'vorah Horn

The Narrative: The Fig Tree Story

“Once there was a great king who went riding in the countryside. By the road, day after day, he saw an old man planting fig trees. When the king’s curiosity became too much for him to hold, he approached the man demanding he explain why he was planting fig trees. “You are old, you will never see the fruits of your labor; you will never eat the figs from these trees.” Patiently, the old man responded: “I came into this world that was already full of trees bearing fruit for me to eat! I don’t plant these trees for me; I plant them for my grandchildren.”

In 2017 Renie Campbell and I began to construct Fig Tree Stories: Elder Tales, as a writing project for Mending Spirit, Art for Healing.

Renie is a writer, teacher and administrator at Abington Friends School and is currently teaching a 12th grade elective called “Telling Our Stories: Reading and Writing Memoir.” I am the founder of Mending Spirit, art for healing. We bring art, art experiences, and artists wherever spirit needs mending.

Renie’s students are learning about story telling and the Elders at Hopkins Center have stories to share but often no one to listen to them. It was our hope that the students would help the Elders tell their stories and share their wisdom. We knew that the art of writing would be healing for all those involved in this project. We wanted to bring a purposeful, healing connection to the Elders in nursing care and to bridge the societal gap between the Elders and the youth. We knew the Elders would have wisdom to share.

We told them, “You have something to tell us, you have a kernel of wisdom to impart, a lesson to share, a way of seeing things that we need. Something only you can give to us. These *seeds of wisdom* are your fig trees, you plant them now and future generations will harvest the fruit. We need you. No one else can give us what you can.”

We asked them to think of what they wanted us to learn, to know.

“If someone would listen, this is what I would tell them. This is my fig tree, my seed of wisdom.” Here is the fruit of our collaboration.

Tommy Yick

Rowland's Story: Take Advantage of Every Opportunity

I love to be surprised. Every now and then, a surprise gets my spirits up. It entices my curiosity and urges me to discover. Rowland's surprise for me was no different. The first thing he told me was that he was a former Marine stationed in Willow Grove. But I was even more struck when he told me his personal record for the four-hundred meter race was forty-seven seconds. To my surprise, he told me he was even in the Olympic trials. He had a lot of amazing stories to tell, and I enjoyed hearing all of them.

Here are some of the stories Rowland shared. He remembered the sharp coldness of the air that filled Elkins Park on a wintry day. The lake was finally frozen to the bottom--or was it? The lake seemed solid enough for a quick round of ice skating, so Rowland and his friend decided it was a perfect opportunity to have a little fun. Both friends fastened on their skates and prepared to step onto the frozen lake. After Rowland was five feet away from the bank, the seemingly thick ice suddenly fractured and he fell right into the freezing water. Rowland was a tough person and he could have helped himself out of the water. But it was a good thing that his friend was there and helped him out as well. They eventually called someone to pick them up in a car so Rowland wouldn't have to walk home freezing. Despite the heating of the car, Rowland was still shivering vigorously in the backseat. That excruciating yet unforgettable memory came back to him when he was watching the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics of 2018. He didn't have much interest in the events other than figure skating because he could relate to skating the most.

That's also why he cannot wait for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. The track and field events remind him of his days as a sprinter/distance runner in Cheltenham high school and at Villanova University. Rowland's event was the four-hundred meter run. In his day, the four-hundred was known as a distance run while it is known as a sprint today. Rowland's best time for this event was forty-seven seconds—only four slower than the current world record, which is forty-three seconds. Rowland's personal record was nationally competitive during the 20th century. He was a state champion for his event

three times in a row. His close friends and relatives were deeply involved in other sports, so he decided to take running with him to college at Villanova University. He continued to compete in the four-hundred meter run and eventually ran for the third leg of the four-by-four hundred meter relay team. His personal record was so renowned that he eventually participated in the Olympic trials. However, a week before the trials, Rowland unfortunately injured himself during a practice and pulled his hamstring. With less than a week to recover, Rowland was not able to perform his best at the Olympic trials. Otherwise, he would have most definitely participated in the Olympics with such an amazing record.

Even though Rowland didn't make it past the Olympic trials, he continued to perform exceptionally at Villanova. In his four by four relay, Charlie Jenkins was the anchor leg for the relay team. The track coach chose Charlie Jenkins as the anchor leg because he had run in the Olympics. His record, however, was less than a second faster than Rowland's record. Rowland figured that it wasn't worth his time to try to beat Charlie Jenkins in the four-hundred meter. He thought to himself that because Jenkins was in the Olympics, there was no point in trying to beat him, because Jenkins already had the prestige. Rowland now wishes that he had at least attempted to race against Jenkins. He doesn't worry about it too much because that was the past, but he tells everyone that you should always take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way, because once it passes, you'll never be able to do it again.

Rowland's short but significant message showed me that it's important to jump on every opportunity that is presented to me in life. I think it will help me be more confident in taking more positive risks. It was great getting to know Rowland and his life story!

Helen Li and Emily Huang

Carolyn's Story: Education is the Most Important Thing

In our childhood memories, motherly love is one thing we cherished the most. So, when we listened to Carolyn talking about her kids, we wanted to know more about how she raised such wonderful and successful children. Carolyn has a gentle, quiet voice and a very kind personality. She was very open in sharing her story and we appreciated her important message.

When we asked Carolyn what life advice she would give us, she immediately said, "Get a good education. Finish school. Education is the most important thing." Carolyn remembers that her father, who taught at Community College of Philadelphia, taught her this important lesson. Carolyn not only educated herself, but she also tried her best to educate her children. She went to Girls' High, which was a competitive high school for girls intending to go to college. Carolyn remembers enjoying school and singing in the choir, which was called Treble Clef.

She went on to Lafayette College, but unfortunately she got sick and had to come back home to Philadelphia. She went to Community College and received her Associate of Arts degree. She then took courses at St. Joseph's University, but she was unable to finish her B.A. During this time, she was raising her children and it was difficult to balance her schooling with her other responsibilities. But Carolyn knew that she had to raise her children to focus on their education.

Carrie, Carolyn's daughter, was a girl who loved singing and reading, especially all of the classics. In tenth grade she realized that she wanted to become a lawyer. Being a lawyer was not an easy thing to do. She listened to her mother's advice about getting at least two years of college and she took it much further. The classic books she read at home must have been influential to her about her opinion towards education; Carrie finished a 4-year degree at Temple Law School while she went on to get two more years of graduate school study. She successfully became a lawyer, thanks to Carolyn's advice. And as a lawyer, she started with child advocacy, and switched to criminal law later.

It's easy to see how hardworking and smart Carolyn's daughter is. Carrie earned a full scholarship during undergraduate school. At the same time, she married her husband, who was getting a bachelor's degree at the time and wanted to be a teacher, and she had a baby daughter. She is also a very independent person. She went to school at night and worked during the day to pay for her own tuition. It wasn't easy for her to have so many distractions to her education at that time. As Carolyn said, sometimes you have to sacrifice your education for your life. It's inevitable.

Carolyn's son, similar to his sister, also cares a lot about education. He graduated from Central High School in Philadelphia and is now at Dartmouth, a prestigious Ivy League school. He is studying accounting and real estate. He also went to France as an exchange student during college.

Carolyn's eyes glowed with energy when she talked about her children and her granddaughter with a great sense of pride and tenderness, even though her own life has had many challenges. We learned from Carolyn that if you teach your children the value of education, they will grow up to be successful and have more opportunities than you did. Since we are getting ready to graduate from high school and go to college next year, we are grateful that we were able to spend this time with Carolyn and to hear her valuable advice.

Cara Tressider

Paul's Story: Be Courageous and Fight Addiction

Although Paul's story was sad, I was really grateful that he shared it with me so I could understand how he learned an important lesson in his life. At the age of 14, Paul was exposed to alcohol. He did not realize that once he took that first sip of alcohol, he would be headed down a road he never thought he would go down. Down this road he experienced a lot of loss and heartbreak. He had a wife and he loved her and he tried to be a good husband, but he messed up because he was an addict.

Paul met Joanna on a blind date in his early twenties--when he realized he had lost control of his drinking. They fell in love and got married in May of 1975. She was 19 and he was 25. It was a really great marriage at first, along with some bickering once in a while. Other than that, they got along pretty well. They got their first dog together and then later a cat. In 1980 Joanna gave birth to their son, Robert. They were together 8 years before everything spiralled out of control.

The day Paul realized things were a lot worse than he thought was one he will never forget. Paul and Joanna were in their bedroom. She struggled with drug abuse, too. Paul doesn't really remember exactly what happened because he blacked out. He remembers he was really drunk and passed out on his bed. He went to sleep but when he woke up, she was gone.

She left Paul and took their 19 month old son with her. His heart was shattered into a million pieces. He was hurt because he lost the two most important people to him. She left Paul for another man--another man who would raise Paul's son. He blamed the alcohol and he blamed himself. That very day, Paul decided that he could no longer let the substance control his life. That being said, he took all his beer and all his liquor and poured everything down the drain. And just like that he stopped drinking.

He slipped up again when he met another girl a few years later, but once he realized things were getting out of hand again, he stopped seeing her and he threw away his alcohol again, this time for good. That was the last time Paul ever drank. He got sober and began to go to AA meetings. With the help of his sponsor, Henry, and the 12 steps,

Paul learned a lot about how to live a sober life and how to deal with his grief. He went to one to three AA meetings a day. It really changed his life and helped him a lot.

Because of addiction, Paul lost contact with his wife and his son, whom he still does not have contact with today. He still lives with the grief and loss of his family. He is embarrassed and ashamed and he hasn't seen his son since he was 19 months old. Paul feels it would be too hard to ever meet his son because he was unable to be a part of his life as he was raised by another man. Paul emphasized that people should learn from his story that it is extremely important to stay away from drugs and alcohol because it can wreck relationships and break your heart. Paul learned this the hard way and I think he was very brave to tell me his story to give this message to young people so they can have a better life.

Taylor Plenty

Michelle's Story: Be Kind to People Who Are Different

At our school we are taught to listen to people's stories with open minds and open hearts. We are taught that every story is worth listening to, and Michelle's certainly is. She has faced and is still facing many hardships, yet continues to be a strong individual with a deep belief in kindness. The most valuable lesson I've learned from Michelle was that listening to someone's story, whether that may be for five minutes or an hour, can make that person feel less alone. I would encourage anyone who reads this to remember that everyone has a story, and every story needs to be heard, no matter how different it may be from your own.

Michelle began her journey as a boy named Gabriel. He grew up in North Philadelphia with a strong love for his mother, sister, and nine brothers. He remembers the red Rambler his mother had, and how she would drive them all around. He enjoyed going to school and making new discoveries, yet he hated how people seemed to overlook him. As he got older, he was very upset that he couldn't seem to find a job anywhere because nobody would accept him because he seemed different from other young men. But always, his mother's house was filled with love and acceptance. Every day began with an "I love you, no matter what" from his big brother. He would look up to his mother with admiration for all the things she did for him. She would say, "Momma made a stew for you," and it would be his favorite meal--a fresh stew with potatoes, beef, tomatoes, just the way he loved it. He would never forget the feeling of seeing the bike he had always wanted, with his mother proudly standing next to it--he knew that she had struggled to get it, working so hard every day. There was a feeling of safety in his mother's house. It was a sanctuary, filled with a kindness he did not receive from the rest of the world, even from others in his own family.

But when Gabriel was 16, he felt he had to move out because life was so hard with the rest of the family. His mother told him, "You don't have to move, you can stay here." But he said he had to go. He knew that many relatives, including her brothers, said to her that her son is gay and she should throw him out, but she would tell them "Love

me, love my child.” His older brother and his sister and her daughter were the only ones that agreed with his mom and stayed close to him. Gabriel did not want to be a burden to his mother because of their prejudice against gay people. He hoped that if he left, her family would accept her again.

So he decided to leave this sanctuary and moved to University City on his own. He needed to go out in the world to find who he truly was, to become the person inside, which was a woman. He was able to express himself as a woman, and became Michelle. Michelle wanted people to refer to her as “she” instead of “he.” Unfortunately, being Michelle did not solve her problems of feeling different and unsafe. Michelle suffered a lot of prejudice and rejection in those years and had to make some really hard choices in order to survive. After a while her mother noticed that Michelle was sick a lot. Her mother didn’t give her a choice about going to the doctor--she just showed up in her car and said “Let’s go!”

That is when Michelle met another very kind person in her life, Dr. Claire Warner. Dr. Warner understood that Michelle was a trans woman and told her that she shouldn’t worry about people looking down on her. The doctor used “she” pronouns to show Michelle that she was supported. Michelle was extremely ill and Dr. Warner made sure she had the medication she needed and took good care of her. Michelle will always remember Dr. Warner’s care and kindness during a very hard time in her life.

To this day, Michelle feels that most people do not accept her and say and do very hurtful things because she is different. Her mother and her brother have passed away, so her sister and her niece are the only family that stay in contact with her. Michelle would like the world to be a place where people are kinder and where being different isn’t a reason to for rejection or hatred. That’s her message: Don’t judge other people, just be kind to everyone. It has been a gratifying experience to learn about Michelle’s life because of her strength and courage.

Chloe Bartlett

Janet's Story: You Only Live Once--Put Yourself First

When I ask Janet for some words to live by, she says, "Stay in school, work hard to achieve your goals, because you only live one time, make the best of it. You don't have time to let people hurt you, you only have time to take care of you." Janet stares at the clock on the wall next to me, like she is trying to keep the hands from moving. She says, "Life goes by fast. You can't miss a beat." Her face lights up as she remembers a happier time in her past.

Janet has a warm demeanor. She smiles as she tells her story, even when the memory is not as happy. She starts off with her family. She lived with her mother and father, and 6 siblings in Philly. She had great relationships with all her family. She tells me of a time when her father took her to get a pair of new shoes. She had never gotten a pair of new shoes before, everything had always been hand-me-downs from her sisters. Her new shoes accompanied her to her 6th grade graduation. She had an amazing relationship with her father. They would talk about literally everything. They would listen to music and sit on the porch. He was her everything.

Janet and her sisters would play jump rope, hopscotch, and baseball. She grew up in North Philly in a time when there was no worry about walking alone or getting shot. She would meet her sister at the dollar store after school. She played the organ for her church and attended school until the 11th grade. Janet loved the old songs her father played, and she loved to make art.

When Janet's grandmom became ill, she wanted to do anything she could to help. This inspired her to become a nurse. Everyone around her and in her family was getting sick, but she loved to see them get better, especially when she was the one who helped them. Janet was able to graduate from Franklin Learning Center and Miami Day School as an LPN. She worked at Jackson Memorial in Florida—she was thankful that they had air conditioning so it wasn't unbearable!

Janet was unable to get her RPN because she had to raise her children by herself, so she couldn't spend more time going to school. She has 4 kids, and 17 grandkids. She loves her kids very much, but wishes she had been able to achieve more in her life than

she has. Her children are too busy now and aren't able to take care of her, which is why she is at Hopkins House.

Janet knows not to take anything for granted. From being molested as a child, to raising her kids by herself, to her son's house burning down, she knows how hard the world is. But these things don't stop her from wanting to keep her story going. She focuses on the good things in life, like her grandkids, and cake, and making crabs for her family. She hasn't let her bad experiences push her down; instead she uses those experiences to shape herself as a person. I am so happy that I got to spend time with Janet and learn this important lesson from her life.

Ralph's Story: Learn Something New Every Day

Ralph is a really dynamic and interesting person who is very open about his life. His story begins in the depth of North Philadelphia. His life appeared pretty simple; growing up with 3 sisters and a little brother who all loved each other dearly. He attended Thomas Edison High School where he partook in one of his favorite hobbies at the time—playing basketball. Ralph strongly stated that “everything happened; at any minute anything might happen.” This was a metaphor that describes the nature of his neighborhood—it was an experience where one couldn’t judge what would happen next—North Philly was full of surprises. He did not love North Philly, but he surely embraced it. “It was where I grew up and I had to be there,” said Ralph. He also said he “wouldn’t trade it for the world.” Overall, looking back at his childhood experiences, Ralph wanted to get the message across that “you learn something new every day.” Ralph’s childhood was an important part in shaping him as a person and it affected how he approached the next phase of his life.

Ralph graduated high school on a Monday and went into the U.S. Army on Tuesday. He spent four years in the service, two of them deployed in Vietnam. The two years he spent in Vietnam were the “best two years of my life,” said Ralph. Being deployed into war is not a situation that most would acknowledge as a favorable or desirable situation—along with war comes anguish and pain, but Ralph was able to find the good in a bad situation. War goes far past the stereotypes that are demonstrated in movies and fiction. No one truly is there looking to kill; the goal is to survive. And Ralph had this mentality at all times. Whenever he’d leave his post, he’d be sure to always have protection on him. “War is unpredictable, you must be prepared for the unexpected.”

One evening, Ralph was standing guard at his post with a few other men. It was getting dark and pretty cold outside. Most of his fellow troops were hitting the sack. About an hour or two later, one of his friends spotted a Vietnamese child walking towards their post. At first, the kid seemed harmless. But when they saw there was a bomb strapped to the kid’s back, Ralph realized they were in danger. Ralph’s friend took

a courageous action, as he risked his life to run towards the child, freed him from the dynamite and got the kid to safety. This was a moment of hard reflection for Ralph—he realized that most of what he was taught was the enemy was actually very young and taught to be “killing machines” since they were children. It’s sad how war impacts people and nations. Ralph is a strong believer that violence doesn’t solve everything. However, Ralph also saw his friend being heroic and saving both a child and the other troops.

Fortunately, Ralph experienced positive things and even had some fun during off-duty times while living in Vietnam, something many troops do not experience while being deployed. Although Ralph had lots of good times, the basics of war were still present. He was deployed with people he did not know before, but at war they grew up together. He also served with a good friend from home, but simultaneously made many acquaintances and bonds with people he would be close with for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, some of his friends were killed in battle and did not make it home. This was devastating and hard for Ralph. These were people whom he cared about and he still remembers them.

Most people would imagine being drafted into a war to be a complete nightmare. War is something that people try to avoid, but when it happens, the impact is typically massive on both sides. When Ralph was put into a situation which is viewed as undesirable by many, he found the good even in a bad situation by making friends and having a positive attitude. He stayed open to learning new things even in really tough times. We really appreciated Ralph’s sense of humor and the lessons he shared with us.

Ron's Story: Be Present in the Moment--Don't Dwell on the Past

It has been really nice to talk to Ron about his life and all the things he has experienced. Ron grew up in Philadelphia went to Central High school. He lived with his parents and two older brothers. He played football for Central and really enjoyed it even though it was very intense training. He mentioned he liked it back in the 50s a lot.

After high school, he went into the Navy for six years. He joined simply because he did not want to be drafted, because if you joined you could pick your own service. One of his brothers was in the Army and the other in the Marine Corps. This was between the Korean and the Vietnam wars when men were drafted if they were not in college. His parents weren't excited their sons were leaving, but they were okay with it.

He remembers taking a test for eligibility. He noticed that students from Northeast High failed it, so he was slightly nervous, but he was happy that he did well. Once he passed, he went into eight weeks of training. Ron described this time as "different but not hard." He learned how to fire a gun, which he enjoyed. Football had him already trained and used to the strict discipline, so the adjustment was not huge. He was ready for the challenges and eventually learned how to take it. They did "athletic things, like marching."

His first station was in Newport, Rhode Island. Specifically, Goat Island. He was on the ship for most of the time. He made friends with people who were very different from himself, although he did not get really close to anyone. He also recalls being the only Jewish guy on the ship. On the ship, everyone was too busy and far away from family to observe their religion, or even to celebrate their birthday. However, that wasn't too hard for him.

Ron did not really miss home while away at sea. He was in a submarine guarding the Russians under the ocean--and he was surprised at how small a submarine actually was. He was stationed between the United States all the way to England. Some of his favorite memories were seeing Paris and England. He knew he would never be able to see

these places again. That was another reason for him joining the Navy--to go to places that he could not see if he had just stayed home and gone to work.

Ron worked in the engine room as an electrician. Because he had a specialized job, everything he asked for he got, which didn't happen to everyone. One time there was an emergency with a fire. One engineer got burnt and Ron will never forget that. He knows he was lucky to have stayed healthy and safe in his time in the Navy.

After serving overseas he found a job for the government as a security guard in a naval base in Northeast Philly. He worked there for 23 years, and that was actually the first time he really experienced being attacked. He and the other workers were taking their lunch break and a civilian worker wanted to get a tag for his car to park in the lot. They told him they were at lunch, so he should come back at 1:00. But instead he grabbed a gun and shot the place up. Ron was shot once in his arm and once in his spine. He said it burned, but he wasn't scared until after he was shot. He couldn't move and fell to the ground instantly. It was very exciting, but he would not recommend it. This was the first and last time he was seriously hurt, which is why he remembers it so well.

Ron has had some major disappointments in his life. He loved cars and had many great memories with them over the years, which is why he gets upset sometimes that now that he is at Hopkins House he can't drive or be around them. He also wanted to get married, but he felt as though he never had time to commit himself to a relationship. He was always taking care of his mom after he served his time in the Navy. He and his girlfriend were together since high school, but she also had to take care of family, so it didn't work out for them to get married. And now that he is at Hopkins House, he is not able to see her anymore. But even with these disappointments, Ron is a person who lives in the moment and makes the best of every situation. When we wondered if he regretted anything in his life, he said: "It passed so I am not sad. Never dwell on the past." We are glad that Ron shared this lesson about being present in the moment with us.

Ms. Maude's Story: Follow Your Dreams and Set Your Own Goals

We feel very lucky to have a chance to get to know Ms. Maude, an extremely intelligent and goal-oriented woman. Ms. Maude's childhood was primarily lived in Virginia with her mom, dad and 8 siblings, 5 brothers and 3 sisters, all but one were older than her. Growing up, she learned how to cook and sew and she had a strong sense of independence.

Her family later moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In high school, Ms. Maude set extremely high goals for herself. A student at West Philly High, Maude was a hard worker and a determined student who always set reachable yet strong goals. She loved studying languages and wanted to graduate from high school, go to college, and become an interpreter. Mr. Cantini, her Spanish teacher, was very supportive of Maude. He believed in her dreams and wanted to see her prosper. Unfortunately, Maude put her own goals on hold at the age of seventeen when she decided to get married. Mr. Cantini was disappointed in the decision she made and the fact that she put her own goals on hold for a boy.

Ms. Maude experienced much regret that she chose to act according to the wishes of her friends and classmates in regards to getting married at the young age she did. It was the custom to find a husband, settle down and get married relatively young during the 40s, so when her classmates and friends were pairing up and settling down, Maude felt the pressure to conform with that behavior. She believes that it was this desire to fit in with the people around her that was her first mistake. Looking back on that decision today, Ms. Maude regrets it, admitting that the man she married had nothing going for him and she only did it because everyone around her was coupled up and she wanted to be a part of that.

Sadly, Ms. Maude dropped out of school when she got married, because her husband didn't want her to pursue her goals. However, she overcame this mistake because she is such a strong and independent woman. She worked hard to get her GED and proceeded to open her own beauty salon, which was a wonderful success for a

woman at that time. Through perseverance and dedication, she made a life for herself. She divorced her husband and raised a family, but unfortunately, spent much of her life taking care of her children and her second husband, ignoring her own goals and desires.

Ms. Maude unfortunately put the wants of others above her own throughout her life, which she warned us never to do. Although several times throughout her life she lost sight of her own power to live the way she wanted to, she was still able to achieve great things in her life, which she is proud of today. This dedication to herself and to her goals really stands out because she found herself in all these bad situations and moments, but she persevered and continued to pursue opening her own business and living her own life.

Ms. Maude realised that the expectations of men and other people in your life are never going to be as important as your own. She warned us against following bad crowds or letting things like sex or drugs influence our decisions. She is a firm believer in setting and achieving your own goals. Ms. Maude has been a true inspiration to us and as young, independent women about to go to college, we will always keep her advice in mind and try to be as strong and self-sufficient as she is.

John's Story: Finding Forgiveness Through Love

We are really grateful that we got to learn an important lesson from our time with John. John has lived in Philadelphia for his entire life as one of fourteen children. He grew up in a rough neighborhood in North Philadelphia, and always struggled with finding good role models to look up to. As a child, he dreamed of being a detective or a fireman, and has always had a desire to help people and change lives. Although John always dreamed of helping people, he lacked good role models and lived in a neighborhood that disabled him from pursuing them. Growing up with so many siblings was difficult for John and his family. His father was not a nice man, and would often abuse John and his siblings, although his mother treated them well. She cared for everyone and believed in John even during the roughest parts of his growing up.

John was always passionate about sports, and after giving up playing basketball, he continued to pursue his love of athletics through boxing. He looked up to Muhammad Ali for inspiration. His mother always supported his love for athletics, and continued to push him on this path after he dropped out of school his sophomore year. Like many other people John surrounded himself with, after dropping out of his high school, John joined one of the gangs made up of his friends and other acquaintances in his neighborhood. This, however, put John in danger due to violence and fights that would often break out. In 1973, as John was standing on the corner of 6th and Montgomery, drinking with the other members of his gang, another gang attacked them. He was stabbed in the liver with an ice pick. Although he tried to run, the other members of his gang left him to fend for himself.

That night, he went to the movies with his girlfriend, trying to forget about his pain. Not even half of the movie was done, and he passed out in his seat. He was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. His girlfriend was by his side for every minute along with a lot of his family members, especially his mom. That same day he was admitted to the hospital, he went through a very long surgery on his liver to sew up the wound. At 16, he was very scared that he wasn't going to make it and had such a long lifetime ahead of

him that he didn't want to miss out on. Before surgery, he had to sign a DNR which meant that if he were to flatline, the doctors weren't allowed to revive him. He had to think that when he was put under anesthesia, there was a possibility that he would never wake up again. He was very sure he wasn't going to make it because that was what the doctors were telling him. Yet, he survived.

This event changed his entire life. At first, he was scared and he wanted revenge. But during his time in the hospital, he realized that he wanted to let it go, even though he still had anger building up inside of him. John knew he had to make major changes in his life because of this one incident. He removed himself from his gang, so he lost some friends, but gained safety and security. For his health, he had to stop playing basketball and he lost the ability to do his favorite sport: boxing. He really missed it. Also, he had to change his diet because his body couldn't handle the same kinds of food and take the same amount of exertion he used to do during sports. He still has a huge scar on his right side from the surgery on his liver

Along with the physical changes, he also had some mental and emotional changes. He was able to realize who his true friends were when he was in the hospital. Those that stuck with him and truly cared for him would remain by his side for the rest of his life. For so long, he was struggling and thought he wouldn't be able to live out his life, and the biggest loss was that he lost his ability to do his favorite sport. His life was completely changed, and it wasn't even his fault. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it changed him forever.

Years later in a pizza shop, John ran into Malik, the man who had attacked him. He wanted to go and hurt his attacker the way that he was hurt years before. However, he knew that it wouldn't get him anywhere. When John confronted him, Malik apologized. They realized it wasn't a personal problem, but it was more forced by the situation because they were in opposing gangs. They knew each other, but they were from two different blocks, so they were bound to be enemies. The next thing John knew, he and Malik became friends. He lost all feelings of revenge, because he had promised God while he was in the hospital that if he got out healthy, then he wouldn't take revenge on Malik. After all of this, it made John realize that God has a bigger plan for him. That there are certain predicaments in your life that you must move on from. Now they pretend

it didn't even happen in the first place. All is forgiven between them, and now they are the closest of friends.

John learned a lot from this experience. Most importantly, he learned that forgiving is all about love. And if everyone loved each other, there would be many less problems in the world. He forgave someone who almost took his life, and he learned from that experience the importance of love. He has carried that moral throughout his entire life, from the moment he was lying on a hospital bed. We will always remember John's story and his message about forgiveness and love.