

THE
muddy turtle
TALKS



curated, compiled and written by hannah hasan

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THE MUDDY TURTLE TALKS

HANNAH HASAN & Q.C. FAMILY TREE

The names, places, and dates have been changed to protect the anonymity of those who were gracious enough to share their stories about life on Tuck.

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Photo Credit: Shardae Hasan

Here for Good

Neighbors, Kindred, Community-- We tell these stories in the spirit of truth. There is a truth that is deeply imbedded in the American soil. It is the story that has repeated itself generation after generation. It is one of appropriation, of displacement, of erasure. And we acknowledge that we cannot and will not share our stories without recognition and respect of those who inhabited this land many moons ago, the native people, those who gave what we now know as Tuck-Tuckaseegee its name. We are because they were.

We are here to exalt the history, the experiences, the people of The Muddy Turtle. In the spirit of uplifting the truth of our existence, we pause to give honor--to the creator and to the native people were the first forcibly displaced, to the ancestors--who have shed blood, tears, love, light on this land.

To truly pay homage to this land and the ancestors who once walked on this plain, we must acknowledge all parts of our past, our present, and our future. We must peel back the layers and understand the history of what has gotten us to this place. We must uphold the truth and beauty of our traditions and experiences, while also shedding light on the dark parts- the difficult spaces.

We are the people of Tuckaseegee, the Muddy Turtle. We know mud- as it relates to healing. Since ancient times, mud has been used to draw toxins from the body. It holds our land together. Created from one of the most essential elements needed for worldly survival- water, mud - might appear to be dirty and ugly, but we know that within that dirt exists the power to survive and rebuild.



We are the people of Tuckaseegee, the Muddy Turtle. We know turtles, the beautiful little creatures, symbolize mother earth and longevity. It carries its house on its back. So, though it may move throughout the land in a slow steady gait, a turtle knows home. He will always have a home, because he carries it with him.

And as we gather here together neighbors, kindred, community. We do so to honor the spirit of the Muddy Turtle. We do so do honor the history of our land and to own the power of our narrative.

No one can tell our stories, but us. No one can hold the experiences of our existence sacred like we can. And while there are those who seek to erase us from their history books, who seek to simplify our reality- our survival with their whitewashed fairytales, who have decided that the communities that we have built from the ground up- many times, with little or no resources- are

no longer worthy of us, worthy of our culture, worthy of our traditions, worthy of our existence;
we invite them to listen.

We recount these moments. We open ourselves up to the pain and emotional toil of reliving
traumatic experiences. In the spirit of our ancestors, we document and share these stories
because we will not be erased.

*Our stories will outlive us.
It will be understood that we were here.
We lived and loved here.
Cried and bled here.
Thrived and shared time and space here.
And while we might be displaced.
Forced to move.
We won't be moved.
These are our stories. Of our community.
We are West Charlotte and We are Here. For Good.*



LISTEN
and understand
our humanity.

On The Run

I was on probation and my baby mother was pregnant with our second child. I wasn't trying to go to jail and leave her out here on the streets. We both didn't have no job. I was hustling, and I had to make sure she was straight. So, I was on the run.

I went on the run for like six or seven months, so I could stack up money and make sure she and our kids was straight before I went to jail. Essentially, we were all on the run. We were staying in hotels and going from one space to another. I knew it wasn't a situation that could last forever, but I was hoping we could make it work until my baby was born, and I could have time to stack enough paper to ensure that they would be ok.

One day me and my baby mama was walking around the neighborhood. We had gotten into it that day. I was walking one way and she was following me yelling. Then the worst possible thing that could happen happened. My probation officer pulled up on me. Turns out my probation officer had went to my house to look for me and when they couldn't find me there, decided to drive around the neighborhood. There I was, walking up Tuck arguing with my baby mama.

I got arrested and locked up. But I was keeping up with my baby mama while I was locked up. We would talk about the babies. I was excited because she was supposed to have my son the month that I got out. I would be there for his birth. But she went into labor early- an entire month before he was due. I missed the birth. It was on September 25, 2015. She called and said, "you know I had the baby today."

I was sleep the whole day she had the baby. I was in the working pod. I had worked and came back to my room and I was just sleep for some reason. When I got the call about the baby, I figured maybe that's the reason I was asleep.

This was a difficult situation. I made some choices that weren't great choices, but they was my family and I needed to take care of them. I'm goin make sure my sons don't have the same outcome as I've had in certain situations in my life. I want for my sons the best of everything. I want to teach them not to go the way I went. I want to teach them the way I shoulda went. They can go the right way, they don't have to go the wrong way. They don't have to make the choices I made.

Two Men and A Card

A while ago I was chased down Tuckaseegee by two random men that I didn't know.

I was on my way to work, but I had missed the number 8. When that happens, I usually walk to the number 13. So, I decided to walk to the store to get me some snacks before work. There was this random guy in the store. He wanted something to eat, but he didn't have any money. I guess he didn't have enough.

So, I said, "Go ahead and get what you want!" As I was saying that two other guys came in the store. They just heard me say, "get what you want." I guess they wanted to take advantage of that. They decided they were gonna get something too. So, I said to them, "I can't buy all you guys something. He just didn't have enough to get what he needed, so I'm helping him out."

I bought the other guy something, got something for myself, left the store, and walked up Enderly to the Number 34. I'm halfway up the street. I usually have my headphones in, but that day, I guess I didn't. I hear somebody saying something, but to be honest I usually keep on walking when strangers try to talk to me.

So, I just heard him calling my last name. I'm like, yo, these people must know me or something. So, I turn around and it's these two guys that were in the store from before that had wanted me to buy them something.

They're like, hey you dropped your card. We know you're gonna need it.

He was like, see you being rude, didn't want to buy us nothing and we got your card back for you.

I felt a little bad, but I explained again that the other guy was in need. Then I just said, Thank you guys! Have a good day!

And I wasn't being rude to them when I was in the store, but I did turn down the offer of buying them food. They still chased me down the street to give me my card back. That was sweet of them. They didn't have to do that. And this didn't surprise me. I was thankful. I love our community. We look out for each other. I've got lots of stories like this. That's just how my community is! This is our West Charlotte- and we're here, for good.

He Was My Brother

He's not my blood brother. He's my Godbrother. My dad and his mother grew up together. His dad was never in his life. So, my dad took on the father role and he and his brother have been like my brother ever since. Around the age of 19 he started gangbanging, and with that...comes a lot of stuff.

One day he was at the store- wrong place wrong time. Someone caught him lacking. He wasn't prepared. He was going to the store just to go to the store. They shot him. The reason they shot him had something to do with a situation where my sister had fought the guys girlfriend. That's why he shot my brother. He got shot in the fall, and man, it was tragic.

My dad loves my brother so much because they have the same birthday. We went to the hospital when my brother got shot. He was on life support. It was bad. He started getting better early winter. We were hopeful because he was doing good.

And then one day my parents called us at my grandma house. The whole family was there. They told us he died. It was sad. But we knew if GOD wanted him, then that was what it was. The guys who were his enemies showed up to the funeral, but we let it ride because we wanted to respect my brother's memory.

I got shirts made for that day. 4 shirts. A black long sleeve, a red one, a white short sleeve, and a black short sleeve. We were gonna wear the shirts to the funeral, but we had a big cookout at my grandmas and everyone wore their shirts there. We dressed more traditional for the funeral.

People who got up and spoke about him--it was weird. A lot of them never knew him. In his 21 years they didn't know how funny he was. He was giving. He was diabetic. We would crack jokes on him when he ate too much sugar. He was my brother. We knew him. They were just speaking to be speaking. We were there for him. They were never there for him.

When I'm asked if I'm surprised if he got shot, I can't say I am. He was gangbanging and when you do that you know what comes with it. People dislike you. People scheme on you. There's weapons, drugs and all of that.

Losing him changed me in some ways. I was thinking about ganging myself or like being in a gang when I got older. I don't want to do that anymore because I have a lot ahead of me. I want to be an OBGYN or maybe a cosmetologist. I'm into the sciences. I'm sad that I had to lose my brother to change my perspective on my own future, but I'm happy that now I have goals that I can be proud of.

Fight

I have experienced a lot of fighting in my life. Not necessarily me fighting, but I've seen a lot of fights in my neighborhood. When I was growing up they used to fight every night, people were getting killed. One time this lady came to our house after trying to break up a fight, she was peppered sprayed. My mom was doing everything she could to help the lady wash the pepper spray out of her eyes. Two years later, a boy, he was only a teenager, he got shot. He was only 17. We've seen this- been around this-from a very young age.

A long time ago my mom met this man name John. He was probably about 5 foot 2, so he was a really short guy. He was a construction worker with really rough skin and wore mostly dirty clothes. But I guess he had a good personality or something. He really took care of my mom. He made sure she was alright, gave her the stuff she needed, took care of the house. He lived with us. He bought my mom a car. He got an extra job. My mom got an extra job. There was a lot of money in the house now.

Things were going pretty good, and then my mom found out he was on Instagram- no Facebook- and he was talking to other women. So, every night I would hear the occasional yelling, the occasional, "Who is this" ... he would end up sleeping on the couch.

If my mom wasn't around he would try to boss me around. But I was always bigger than him, so it didn't really phase me. I would tell him, "get my mom to tell me, and then I'll do it." I never really wanted to do what he said. As time passed, their relationship slowly started to fade away.

They kinda stopped- you could just tell it wasn't a relationship anymore. It was like a roommate agreement.

One day I was home, and they had pulled up in a new car that my mom had gotten. He cared more about the car then he did about my mom. She would get it dirty ever so often...You could just tell that he liked material things a lot more than he liked us. One time he yelled at me for touching the screen of the tv.

Time passed, and my mom told him to take the car. She put everything that was hers in a little bag and put it in her room. I came outside to make sure everything was ok. She said, don't get involved. I got on my bike and rolled down to my friend's house.

I stayed down there for about an hour and a half, when I decided to call to ask her if I could stay the night at my friend's house. I called and called and she didn't pick up the phone. I decided to ride the bike back to the house.

I got there and John was the only one there. He told me the police had took my mom away. I asked him why, he said my mom had hit him with something. I was hoping she was ok. I asked him if he was alright, if he was ok.

He said he was good. He took all his stuff and moved out. He left a mess, so I decided to clean up. I put the new mattress that she had bought in there. And my aunt came and got me that night. When we picked up my mom, she told me a very different story.

She said John had crawled through the window of her bedroom and was angry at her. He began to choke her on her bed. She picked up this gold mirror that my grandma had- it's about 20 or 30 lbs., and she had hit him in the head. He had a gash on the side of his head.

I began to get furious. She told me that he wouldn't have done that if I were there. And I felt guilty because I left. I knew that I wouldn't leave next time.

We got back to the house that night. I was checking the mailbox. She yelled at me and told me to open the door. She presumed the room would still be a disaster, but when she opened the door and saw where I had cleaned it, she started crying and thanking me. I told her if he ever tried to do anything like that again, I would kill him. I meant that.

You know, it's hard being a young black man growing up on the westside. You might not know what you're walking into. You gotta know who to trust. I trust my mama, that's it.

I think it's good that we have a school to go to. We have each other.

But to be honest, I don't know what my life's gonna look like from here.

I hope it's good-- in that I hope I don't die at a young age. I hope it's a good life. I hope I can take care of my mother one day. Maybe I'll have my own house, a wife, kids, two cars. A job.

I have a job now. I cut grass. Maybe in the future I'll be an entrepreneur.

Maybe in the future I can create a life that always feels safe, that doesn't feel scary, that doesn't involve fighting

Wake

When I was locked up in prison, I got a phone call from my brothers. They told me my mama had a week to live. Everybody else had known for a while, but they didn't want to tell me at the time because of my circumstance. It was really hard. I tried to stay focused. I maintained and prayed.

I was in closed custody- max facility lockup. We was cut off from the world. We had no privileges.

So, I didn't think I was gonna get out. I didn't think I would be able to say my goodbyes, but someone on the outside, someone from our community, an advocate went to the powers that be and fought for me.

Because of that, I was allowed to attend her wake. The CO let me stay an extra hour and have time with my family.

I didn't get to go to the funeral, but because somebody was willing to speak up for me, I got to say my goodbyes to my mama.

I was 20 years old. She was 35 when she died with Stage 4 Cancer.



Storyteller: Zahra Mahdi, Photo Credit Tracy Watts

Choices

Back when I was 14 I had an incident with some of my friends that caused me to be locked up for armed robbery. I was charged with three felonies in one: armed robbery, conspiracy to commit armed robbery, and common law robbery.

You see, I was a little more blessed than the other people my age. My mama had bought me a phone and all the accessories that come with it. There were some people with the same phone, but they had bought theirs off the streets.

It was a normal day. I went to play basketball with all my homeboys at the park. After the game was over, I noticed that somebody had tampered with my phone. I noticed that the SD port was messed with. Someone had stole the SD card from my phone. It was a small card, a small thing, but it was mine. And it cost money, so I got upset about it.

You see, when you play basketball you don't want anything in your pockets. So, I had set all my stuff to the side. Everyone else does too, so I didn't think much of it. I was so into playing basketball that I didn't notice somebody tampering with my phone.

I was mad and heated as I walked back to the neighborhood. I asked the people the closest to me if they seen anybody with my phone. They gave me a name. I went and approached the man. I was only 14. He was like 19 or 20. I approached him and asked him what was up with my SIM card. He said that he ain't have it. He told me to look at his phone. He gave me the phone and I took it and ran home with it. Boom. This is my phone now. I told him that. I ran home.

He called the police on me. They pulled up to my house. He pointed me out. The police searched my house and found guns and stuff. They weren't my guns, but that's how, at 14 years old, I got an armed robbery charge. He told the police that I had physically taken it from him with a gun- which I didn't. He had handed it to me, and I ran with it.

But I received armed robbery charges, went to juvenile detention for about 3 weeks, and came home and was on house arrest. They let me out on good behavior, because I was a good kid. I wasn't a bad kid. I just made a mistake. So, I was on house arrest for about six or seven months. I was in 8th grade. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to attend my eighth grade graduation. I came off of house arrest the day school started my 9th grade year on August 25th. That experience made me a better person. It taught me about how to handle myself in the hood, how to interact with the police, and how to never find myself in that situation again.

Growing up, I had played football- contact football- my whole life. That situation impacted me a lot. Because of it, I wasn't able to play for my high school team. I wasn't able to attend workouts throughout the summer.

The football community that I had played for since little league knew me. That community is very close knit. The players and parents and coaches all knew each other. So, all throughout my younger years, I was expected to play for one of the top high schools. I was emailing the coach and everything throughout the summer, but the coach told me I couldn't workout with an ankle monitor on.

That altered my high school career. I was pretty talented in football. I wasn't the biggest guy, but when it came to wits and athleticism, I was outstanding. I was good, but I wasn't good enough because of the circumstances that my life handed me.

I ended up playing my high school career for a private school. I started running back JV and went to Varsity. I had a started linebacker position, and they believed in me. I could have went to college. Everybody I went to High School with went D1. Bruce Dixon- he plays for Dartmouth right now. Meek Henry went to some school in Virginia. I've got a couple of other friends who went on to play NFL football. Ji Alexander, I played against him in Little League. He just got drafted first round 17th pick to the Packers. Deshaun Wilson- just signed as a running back to the Buccaneers.

I was around stellar company. I was around top of the line athletes. In my earlier years. I was the captain of my team. I could have went to the NFL, but I didn't. GOD had a path for them, but that wasn't the same path for me.

My path here has been different, but maybe it was so I could be here telling my story, and impact someone else. I've had multiple life changing experiences, including the situation with the cell phone, and a home invasion that resulted in me and my dad having to fight for our lives when I was 15 or 16. That's a situation that still impacts me to this day. That hardened me a bit, but I tried to make it better me. I'm a good person, but I'm still more street than anything. My juvenile record was expunged, and I have no charges on my record to this day.

I'm blessed beyond measure. I believe it's because of the things GOD put me through. They say GOD put his toughest soldiers through the toughest battles. And to be honest, there are people going through way worse. There are people my age that are homeless, hungry, really struggling. I'm where I am because there are people who I have met on my journey to bless me.

I've got to use my blessings to bless other people. I try to make sure I'm around a good crowd of people who want the same thing in life as me. I'm a rapper, but it's not just about that, I want to be around people who are pursuing their dreams. I want to let the kids around me know that you can be who you want to be.

I'm supposed to be locked up or dead, but I haven't let tragic moments impact me in the worst way possible. I could have been out here trying to rob people. People have robbed me. I could have been out here trying to hurt people. People have hurt me and my family members. I could have been out here trying to sell drugs. People have sold drugs to my family. But I have chosen another path.

I've got the strangest, most unexpected job for a young dude like me from the hood. I'm a barista- IN THE HOOD. I sling coffee every day. But I'm doing what I have to do to provide my family and change my community. I'm community oriented.

My role is small in this community, but it's important. It's to let the kids know they aren't their circumstances. You want to go to the NFL? You can do that. I've seen somebody do that. I could have done it. You don't have to be out here selling drugs. You've got other choices. You don't have to do that.

If I can help, that's my role here. We can all make our community a better place. We have a responsibility to. I've got people helping me chase my dreams, and I'm here to do the same for others. We are all.

This is our WEST Charlotte. And we are here. For GOOD.

Ride It Out

We had no intention of leaving. We had heard the news reports. We heard all of the buzz around town and at our jobs, but this wouldn't be the first storm that hit our town. Just a few years back Hurricane Matthew hit while I was pregnant with my baby girl. We didn't evacuate. We stuck around. I walked and walked on the treadmill until she was ready to come. We didn't lose our home that time. We were just fine when the storm passed.

Also, the truth is our family of six-- me, my husband, and our four small kids-- couldn't go to our parents' house. There was just no space. After hearing initial news reports, our biggest fears were that we might lose power, and maybe the tree might fall on the car. So, we moved the car to the other side of the yard and kept living our lives.

As the week progressed, the concern heightened. My co-worker said that her dad, a meteorologist, was warning that we should leave. My brother was calling from out of state, asking us our plan. We planned to stay and ride it out. That was, until our plans were changed for us. Our landlord, she required that everyone from our trailer park community evacuate. We had no choice but to prepare to leave our home.

So, we did. I cleared out the fridge, which meant I had to throw away the groceries that we had just purchased. I packed two weeks' worth of clothes for our family--stuffed my kid's clothes into their little school backpacks. Each one of my children picked a stuffed animal, my husband -a photographer- took his camera, and I grabbed a stack of photos.

They were pictures from my childhood that I had recently gotten from my mom. Some were from before I was even born... from my mom's wedding. In hindsight, I'm so glad that I grabbed them. Because if I didn't, they would be under water.

We piled into our small vehicle and headed to Durham to ride out the storm at my aunties house. I told the kids it would be a fun adventure. Auntie is in a bigger, different city. She has a trampoline. It will be like a mini vacation. It was the furthest that we had ever traveled in a car together as a family--2 and a half hours. There was a lot of "are we there yet" and "I need to go to the bathroom" along the way. We got lost a few times, but eventually we made it.

And then we waited.

We were worried about our home and our belongings but didn't have much time to focus on that because we were worried about my husband's family that had stayed behind. Shortly after the rain started, they were trapped. They were panicking....saying they wish they woulda left. I was on Facebook begging, "somebody please go help them."

Then after a sleepless night and monitoring the situation on social media, we learned that they were finally rescued. The community on social media also kept me updated on the trailer park community that we live in. The images were dire, but we were hopeful that when we returned home, well we were hopeful that we would have a home.

And a few days later, after the storm passed, after roads became safe enough for us to get home, we piled back into our small vehicle and headed towards our fate. When we pulled up into the yard, we told the kids to stay put in the car.

My husband and I went to the front door. He pushed on it. He had to put his full weight against the door in order to force it open. We were met with dark, pungent, green, wet, mold. Everywhere. On the walls. On the furniture. The FEMA agent would later joke that he was glad that he had recently lost some weight because otherwise, the floor would have caved in under him.

Total loss. ***There, in the midst of chaos, there was no calm after the storm.*** Our entire marriage-- 9 years-- the lived experiences of me my husband and our kids, the only home that they had known--everything gone.

As we drove back to Durham, away from the place that nurtured us and provided a safe haven for us as a family, I thought of the conversation that I had with my eldest son right before we evacuated. He's an old, wise soul.

He asked, "So we are about to leave this house, will this house be here when we get back?"

I said, "Yes. It will be here?"

He said, "OK. Will we be able to come back to our school?"

I said, "Yes.?"

And he said, "OK. Good. Because I don't want to leave Hunter. He's my best friend."

And my hearts breaks, for my extremely shy baby boy who never got to say his last goodbye to his only friend. It hurts for all of my kids and the subsequent trauma that will ultimately always be attached to this experience. We have decided to move to Durham. My aunt will let us stay with her until we can get on our feet. Both me and my husband will have to find new jobs. Our kids will use those same backpacks that unknowingly housed the last bit of the life that they once knew, to pack up with school supplies and return to school...a new school.

As for me, I haven't cried yet. I don't know that there is time or space for that. I've got to make sure that my kids know we are going to be ok. I don't want my husband to see me upset. I feel like if I break down, I'm going to break. And while our situation isn't great, it could be worse. We have a roof over our head. Our family made it through the storm. We have new beginnings to look forward to.

We have memories to cling onto, snapshots of a past that fill us with joy, and pictures--we have real, physical, tangible pictures-- that tell the story of who we once were and provide hope for what is to come.

He Takes Care of Us

I've been living on this side for over 5 years now. There have been some changes. Gentrification has hit us hard. My neighbor lost her home, and now they are going in and remodeling it and it's gonna change the neighborhood. A month after I moved in, I started seeing the changes. They were putting new pipes in the ground and doing little stuff like that, so I knew that some changes were coming.

When I moved into my place, I had a surprise waiting for me. I noticed some little critters running around. I said, Oh my GOD. We had no idea when we signed the lease. I lived with those creatures for 3 and ½ years. The roaches. And then I also saw some little mice, which was the tip of the iceberg. But now it's been officially exterminated. I don't have a roach or mice problem anymore because my landlord is now coming and spraying. He's spraying the outside. He's keeping traps underneath the house to keep it down. He's been doing this for four years, but now it actually works.



Photo Credit: Shardae Hasan

Before it was bad. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I would see little baby roaches. I put traps down, and the traps caught all of them, but I didn't touch them. I threw some borax on it and it started to squeak.

My rent went up \$5, which was realistic, and my landlord took my carpet out because it was dirty and smelly.

My landlord has been good to me. He's always does what he supposed to do. I don't have to call him. He comes. He's got more than one property and he takes care of us. It feels good. I have confidence and trust in him. A lot of landlords are just for the money. They don't want to fix things. They call them slumlords, but he's a good landlord. I'm grateful for that.

This is my West Charlotte. And I am here. For Good.

A New Lease on Life

Keyon was my neighbor and my good friend. It was one day that he came over to visit, and I'll never forget that day. He came over to my house and he was just so happy because he was about to have a baby. He had a baby on the way- and he and his girl was about to get a crib. A crib for the baby and a home for them.

He was telling me how happy he was and how he needed to get away from this side of town and start a new life. He wanted a new lease on life. He had a rough life. He had been through a lot of stuff and this was his opportunity to start new.

He was also getting on me about getting on my feet and getting a job. He was like--I'm bout to move, me and my girl, and he was just so happy...and he was telling me I needed to do the same thing. So, the next day I didn't wake up until late like 12:30.

When I woke up my other next-door neighbor told me someone had gotten killed. I didn't think nothing of it. I'm thinking it can't be none of my people. I doubt it. I'm going on about my day and I say-- about 4:30 in the afternoon we saw some detectives come our way to the next-door neighbor's house and they said my friend Keyon was dead.

And so I was, just, like in total shock. I was like, who could kill somebody on a Sunday? Like, he got killed a little before 12. Church hadn't even let out yet. Who could kill somebody on a Sunday? I couldn't believe it. I rushed to the scene like this can't be real. I saw all the police and the crime scene tape. I kept thinking - this can't be real.

And to make it even worse his last words were "take care of my daughter". And no one ever said it would be a girl or a boy, but that was his last words. Nobody even knew he was having a daughter. But maybe he did.

And it's rough because he didn't have any enemies. He got in a couple of fights here and there but nothing major. But I was in total shock. Knowing he had on the daughter on the way was even worse. Just the day before he was so excited. Everybody was in shock.

We still don't know to this day who shot him or why he was shot. Still unsolved to this day.

WHO COULD
kill somebody
on a Sunday?



Storyteller: Sajdah Ali, Photo Credit Tracy Watts



The Mom Effect

My childhood was not all rainbows and unicorns. I've been through a lot of dark stuff. Like my relationship with my stepdad- it's hard to cope because of the stuff my real dad put us through. When I was young my mother was a drug addict. She got into a relationship with my biological dad and he was very abusive.

Some of the stories my mom would tell us are so brutal. I've blocked some of it out. Some of it I don't even remember.

He put a gun in her mouth. I wasn't even gonna be here. I was literally gonna be dead, but the gun was jammed. He was gonna kill my mom, kill me, and she was pregnant with my sister. My mom has been through a lot. Often, I don't show it, but I think she's such a strong woman. For her to experience getting beat on to such a degree-- getting grease in her eyes and being burned-- to having to leave us on our grandmother's steps. We've had so many people come in and out of our lives to take care of us because she couldn't take care of us herself.

To this day, me and my mom don't get along. When I was young my cousin tried to molest me. Two family members tried to molest me twice. I've been raised around a bunch of boys. I don't really know how to act ladylike. When it comes to wearing dresses and things I just...I don't. That's why I wear a lot of sweats and things. Because I'm insecure. That's why I don't like men looking at my body. The way I'm built...a lot of men try hollering at me. I don't want to be just know as a girl with a big but and big boobs. I want to be known for my personality...for my brain...and the way I treat people. But I will never get treated that way. Because men...their mentality is so messed up.

I can tell a man I'm 15.

This happened recently. This man constantly coming at me and I'm telling him, I'm only 15. And he comes and me and tells me stop wearing makeup. Stop trying to be grown. I don't even wear makeup. I can't help the way I look. ***I'm telling you I'm 15, and you're constantly coming at me trying to get my number-- trying to get on the bus with me.*** That's why when I get around men, my guard goes up. Men take advantage of me. I'm vulnerable. So, if I get a boyfriend, whatever he wants I'll do.

My boyfriends, my ex-boyfriends. They cheat on me, and then I go back. Because that's how vulnerable I am for love. When I get in relationships, the first thing I throw in there is my heart. I want to give it my all. But they throwing in half of they heart. I don't like showing my arms and legs. I'm afraid of what you're gonna think of me, what you're gonna say. I have a tough exterior, but on the inside I'm hurt. I've been to so many counseling sessions, I don't really like counseling anymore.

My mom tells me I'm depressed, but I just don't know it. Sometimes at the house I have these emotional moments, when I flip. Everyone is like, "somethings wrong with you." But nothing's wrong with me. I just have a lot of pain. I have lot of pain inside that I don't want to release on the wrong person. It's not their fault I'm this way. So, I blame myself. I blame myself for my mom getting beat on. I have a guard up that I can't let down.

My mom tried to hide us from everything. She was very uptight. She didn't want us on YouTube. She tried to guard us so much. But she can't because of the lifestyle we live. Some of the things we see and some of the things going on around us--ain't no average kid ever gonna see that. So, she began to give us leeway. She has eased up on us as time has gone by. When she met my step dad she quit using drugs, she straightened up, went to college. She's such a different person. She used to call me and my sister names. She used to call us the b-word. But she's happier now. She's in a happy, healthy relationship. She's not uptight and angry. She respects us now.



Photo Credit: Shardae Hasan



Storyteller: Keya Hamilton, Photo Credit Tracy Watts

The Teacher Becomes the Student

It was my first year teaching at one of Charlotte's most notorious, and history rich high schools on the west side. There was a student- we'll call her Lisa- who helped to shape the teacher I was to become.

You see I had really enjoyed working with students in Los Angeles, so I moved to Charlotte to become a teacher. This student, Lisa, was in my third block Physical Science class. I worked at a specialty academy that was housed on the campus of the high school. The academy was formed to help students who were struggling, those with barriers to completing high school. It was our goal to give those students everything that they needed to graduate.

I came in during the first year of that academy being a part of the school, and at that time the high school as a whole only had a 50% graduation rate. The instructional culture was really low. You could barely distinguish when class was going on versus when classes transitioned. It all kinda blended together.

This third block that I taught in was a crazy third block. Everyone knew that. It was understood. And this was my second semester teaching Lisa. At some point, during that semester it was very clear--well honestly this was a physical science course. It was watered down Chemistry and watered down Physics. It was very clear that this student didn't need what I was teaching. She knew chemistry and I was teaching her basic atomic numbers.

And if I'm being completely honest I was not a teacher that kids deserved back during my first year. I was trying to find my own and Lisa was very clearly, really intelligent and bright. And she knew that I didn't know what I was doing in the classroom.

But, there were days when she wasn't making the right choices. She fought at school. She got suspended. Would miss days. She really was not on the right path. But not because of academics. Possibly, the school wasn't giving her what she needed. At some point she became pregnant and was going to have a child. So, she missed a whole lot of school.

She had her child and came back with a fire inside. She was like I've gotta get back in school. I've gotta get my work done. And she came back. She would come on Saturdays. She caught up. It was no big deal. She graduated that year. It's not like there was huge transformational change, but she did what she needed to do to graduate on time. And she had her daughter as well.

I think Lisa and I had a really good relationship because of how smart she was and because she worked really hard. I knew about some of the situations, the things that she was going through and initially when I came into that school, I didn't come in aware. I wasn't aware of generational and situational poverty and what it looked like.

I was ignorant. I would question... how could someone this smart and this hardworking be in some of the situations she's in? That sticks out because slowly, but surely I began to understand that this is bigger than someone's individual choices here.

This isn't about bad choices. There are some bigger systems that are keeping Lisa, and students like her, to be in a space of consistently fighting for survival in this life. But she persisted. She had her child. She graduated.

Prior to meeting Lisa, I had worked with students living in poverty. I worked with kids. I had very theoretical beliefs that we are all just dealt different cards and kids have to have the opportunity to live up to their GOD given potential, which is equally distributed. But what is not equally distributed is opportunity. I had a very theoretical belief of that. Students like Lisa gave me a much more concrete experience with that.

She was working 20 times as hard as any white male student, and the outcomes would look very different. That was a turning point for me. It wasn't just Lisa. There was a definite recurring theme that essentially kept coming up. The theme that people are doing their best and working hard, but the system is pretty rigged against folks who don't start with an upper hand.

And as my life as a teacher progressed, my relationship with Lisa progressed. I kept up with her. I would follow where she was working-- how hard she worked to get ahead. I saw all that she did to protect her family.

I am an educator who came from a privileged background. I learned about the stock market and building wealth at a pretty young age. I always shared that with students. Lisa was one of those students who was always interested in the stock market and finance.

A few years back, I got really lucky and made some money. I purchased two new houses--two rental properties. And one day I saw Lisa say on Facebook that she was looking for housing. So, I said hey, I've got this rental property. You can live in it. Lisa was like Oh my GOD, and she accepted my offer. So, I started renting this home to Lisa, her sister, and her mom.

And they say don't mix who you know and business. And I'm totally not that person. I'll break that rule in a heartbeat. Because a person I know in our community needs housing. I have housing. Why would I not do that?

So, we established rent and they moved in. For the past four years, we have an ongoing relationship that has transitioned from student/teacher to landlord/tenant. I guess it's a transactional relationship because they live there. But it's more. For me, the story has been watching Lisa's resiliency in the face of a great deal of adversity and seeing someone who has now 2 children to support her family--her mom, her sister-- as a collective family unit. Lisa has always stepped up. She's always done what needed to be done.

It has been Lisa and students like here who have shown me-- inside and outside of the classroom-- what it means to push through in the face of continuous adversity. It's not lost on me that I was a teacher with a lot to learn, and through students opening themselves up to me-- teaching me about survival I was also the student. We take care of each other. We hold each other up. This is all of our West Charlotte...and we are here...for good.

Black Garlic & Black Love

I moved out over on Tuck in 2008. It was me and my then-husband. Together, we ran a ministry for recovering adults--those who had dealt with addiction to drugs and alcohol. It was our calling together. Through it we were doing some really amazing work-- providing a place for people to stay and find healing at one of the most difficult times in their life. We did that work together for years, and ultimately ended up scaling down and then stopping the ministry. My husband would eventually die, and I became a widow.

I decided to stay in that house though. I wasn't sure why I shouldn't move, but I didn't want to live anywhere else.

I went on with my life. I own my own cleaning franchise. I'm a baker. I'm a very busy person. I found ways to keep busy.

And at some point, I started to notice the field across the street. There was a lot of hustle and bustle going on around there. Bit by bit, I started seeing things popping up. Something was growing.

So, I thought it might be a good idea to walk across the street and see what was going on. I took my little niece with me. It was a community garden. We saw people were putting dirt in the ground. There was also a chicken house and an indoor beehive. There were three panels there. You could see the bees inside and it was all really fascinating. While I was there, I met the farmer- Anthony- briefly. It was a nice visit, and that was that.

Life went on. A couple of months would go by, and I told my niece that we should go back over again.

“Let’s see what’s growing.” We visited again, said hi to Anthony, and kept it moving.

And then one Sunday morning I was at home getting ready for church. I heard a knock on the door. It was him, the farmer-- Anthony. He had brought me over some tomatoes and other things that he grew out of the garden. It seemed like they had grown overnight. And I was in a hurry that morning, but he was standing there with his vegetables, grinning--like really proud of himself-- so I took the time to listen.

He also had some beans for me. He said when you cook them, save some for me. Before he left, he asked me if he could have a hug. I said yes. This man wrapped his arms around me and gave me one of the best hugs I’ve ever had. Ummmmm.....It was like you could just feel his presence.

As I went back into the house, I said to myself, what just happened?

He came back 5 or 6 minutes later. This time he brought one of his favorites--black garlic. He bought black garlic and honey, a mixture that he said I could put in my tea.

He left such an impression on me.

And we hadn’t spoken for 2 or 3 weeks when he came back over. He was with his cousin. He said his stove or microwave or something was broken. He cooked some fish while he was there.

At that point he asked if I was single. I told him about the passing of my husband. And he was so kind, and talkative. He talked about his favorite, black garlic, and how he had made some black garlic cookies with the kids in the neighborhood. He was surprised that they really liked it.

He also talked a lot about health. When I met him, I wasn’t that concerned with what I was putting into my body, but he made me think about it more. And the more we talked, he told me he was going to come over, and we were going to make some black garlic cookies and that would be our first date.

And we never did have that date with the black garlic cookies, because he took me out on a real first date. And he’s not only a farmer. This man could cook. He used to make me the best meals in the beginning, and I’m a baker, so it was on. But now that we’re together, he doesn’t cook as much. You know...he got the girl--but sometimes he will still cook a meal that’s so dynamite. He’s a great cook. We got married in December. It hasn’t quite been a year yet.

But it's been beautiful. The seed was planted, and love grew. I believe our love, our marriage was ordained. We complement each other. Now I know why I was supposed to stay here after my first husband died. This neighborhood has been through a lot, but this neighborhood has some good in it. Our love story is proof.

This is our west Charlotte, and we are here, for good.

Coach

Everyday me and my friends, we would shoot basketball. I had a passion for basketball. I would go to practice and see the coaches with their teams. I would think to myself, I wish I could coach a basketball team-- make a difference with the kids. I saw how happy they would be going to their games and stuff. I wanted to be a part of that.

I kept going to practices and this coach came to me one day and said he was trying to put a 15 and 16-year-old team together. He asked if I could help him out. I said sure. He said he would also be needing an assistant coach too.

I said, "I'll be your man. The assistant coach."

So, I knew a lot of young people around that age group that shot basketball, and I told them about it. They signed up. We had a good team. I recruited maybe about 10 solid players.

The coach was happy. We were representing Bette Rae Rec Center. The first year, we made it all the way to the championship. We lost by like 5 or 6 points. I told the team we played a good game and we will try again next year.

The next year came and we tried again. We made it all the way to the championship again. Lost again.

We went back the third year. The third year we started playing church league and rec ball. We made it close to the championship. My coach was sick one game. He let me coach the game. I was really excited to coach my first game by myself. That day we could only get like 5 players. We usually had 8 or 9, but this time I didn't have enough time to sub out.

They had to play the whole game. This time we are playing against a coach who owns the entire league. I knew the deck was stacked against us. But I told my team to go out there and give it your best. That's all you can do. That's all I asked for.

They went out there and gave it they all. They fought hard. I called a lot of time outs to give them a break. I could tell they were real tired. We ended up losing by 8 points. I was proud of them. So proud of them. I told them they gave it their all. Especially with what they were up against.

The next year, I was supposed to get my own team. I ended up going to jail and catching a bogus charge. That ended my coaching career because you can't coach kids with a record. I was hurt. It really made a difference- in their lives, and in mine. It was such a blessing to see the smiles on the kids' faces when they played basketball every Saturday. It kept them out of trouble. It was bettering their future, and mine.

The Village

We've all heard that it takes a village to raise a child. I know that to be true. But recently, I learned the value in the village when it comes to supporting an entire family, my family. When I moved down here from up north 16 or 17 years ago, I found a little home on the west side of Charlotte.

Prior to my move in, I heard all the rumors, all the bad stuff about the west side--especially the Tuckaseegee Road area. I heard all the stories, but I didn't really encounter too many negative experiences. There's a lot of hearsay, but I stay to myself. I go to work, spend time with my family, and mind my business.



Photo Credit: Shardae Hasan

So, three years ago we were renting a home that was \$650 a month. And I'll be honest, it was hard. My husband and I had come to an agreement that he would be at home and make sure the kids got to school. I would work. It made the most sense for our situation. But it became too much. \$650 a month for rent, plus utilities, gas, back and forth to work, and other necessities... we knew we couldn't make it.

I felt so bad. I felt afraid and a bit humiliated. It was so discouraging and stressful to me at the time. I kept going back and forth about different ways to approach the situation, But I knew that I had to call my landlord and have a conversation with her. I owed her that much. She deserved to hear from me what was going on. She came over and I explained our situation.

The bills were piling up. Light bill was piling up. Water was piling up. I let her know that it all piled up on us and we couldn't afford to live there anymore.

I told her that we had decided to move into a hotel until we could find something else. She said she appreciated the honesty. She hated to see me move, but if I had to do that to accommodate my family, she said she understood. I appreciated her grace. I needed that at the time. Of course, I apologized, and she understood, and she said if she had anything else that I could afford they would be more than happy to place me there, but they didn't have any other property cheaper than what I was paying.

So, our little family of four quietly packed our things--moved out of our home-- and moved into a hotel. We tried to keep as much stability as possible. It was still in the area, so we were able to keep the kids in the same school. It was an adjustment though. All four of us were in one room. That didn't provide much privacy, but we made due. This would have to work until I could find a higher paying job or another option.

That other option came when my sons were getting off the bus one day. One of our former neighbors-- who happened to be the director of an organization that was intent on building community on the west side--asked my son to please have me call her. I did. I'm a private person, so it was difficult to discuss my situation with her, but at that moment she reminded me of my village. She explained that their organization had a home with an empty room that we could move into so that we would no longer have to pay to stay in a hotel.

Of course, this wasn't an ideal solution, but it was what we needed at the time. It was a hard decision to make. I had been on my own since I was 18. I had never moved in with other people. I felt a type of way about the fact that I needed to move in this space. But the truth was, it was a good option that we needed. So, we moved in.

We were there for a few months, and then that same neighbor and her husband let us know that through their organization, that they had some apartments that were becoming available, right there on Tuck, and we could move in. I told them that of course, we were interested, but at that

time I was in between jobs working for a temp agency. I wasn't sure that I would be able to afford it.

They told me that we could move in and stay there until I found a full-time job.

And when I got that job, we sat down and discussed rent. We looked at my income, other expenses, and decided that the rent for this one-bedroom apartment would be \$460 a month.

They got the place straightened up and cleaned for us. It's definitely not the biggest space, but we turned the dining room into a bedroom-- so now there are two bedrooms. We have our kitchen and living room. It feels really good to be able to have and provide a roof over my children's head. God has seen me through the worse to where I'm comfortable now.

We lost my husband to a fire last year, but family is everything. It's so important for us to be in a home and be on one accord with another. Home is a place of peace and love where you can get together and eat and sleep. It's a gathering place. With the help of those in my village, we have a place to live--a place to gather--while it might not be perfect, it's serving its purpose. For that, we are grateful. So grateful.

Ready To Go

I think it was around '94 when we moved over to Tuck. My husband would say '95, but no, I'm pretty sure it was '94. Anyway... it was his mama who said it was time for us to move out. Said we needed a place of our own. She wasn't wrong. So, she took us driving around looking at places. Everything in our price range just bout looked like it was in our price range. Small, dirty, infested with critters. But when we saw the place on Tuck, it wasn't bad. For a duplex, it was kinda big. I told my husband, "this is the place I want." So, we moved in.

You won't believe that as big as the rooms were, back then, in '95, the rent was \$200. \$200. We in the same space now. Now it's \$700.

It happened bit by bit. The landlord would say that the price of things is going up, so she would have to go up on rent. We started at \$200 and then soon it was \$400. And then something happened. She didn't want to tell me the bad news. They was selling everything around there and she said, "If I'm made an offer, I'll have to sell. You might have to find you somewhere else to stay if you can't afford it. And she sold. Sold to some woman in New York. That's how we got to \$700.

And the woman don't even live in North Carolina. She made all these promises in the beginning. She was goin fix everything. She was gonna make some changes. Hmmm.... It's so cold in here in the winter that we sitting inside with coats and blankets on. I asked her if she could at least get new windows and do away with the flip windows so we wouldn't freeze. She said, "no."

I can at least be happy that unlike most, we ain't got roaches. But we do have bed bugs. They coming in from the back apartment since they put those other people out.

The New York owner hired a realty company so they could come in and help with property management. Those folk said they were gonna have someone come in and look at the bed bug situation. Looks like we goin have to pay for a pest company. The owner says she's only paying a portion of the \$900 bill. I have to pay \$720 of it myself. That's goin be \$100 a month added onto my rent till I pay it off.

Some folks have said I could complain to the city but I'm afraid that they could put me out. I can't have that. I don't know where I would go. I mean, I have a little money in the bank, but not enough. When you're looking for a new place, sometimes they want you to have four times the rent before they will let you in. I don't have that. That's why I hope one day I can find a private owner who will work with me.

Also, I want to move from this side of town because I'm having problems with my oldest sons' friends harassing me. He's got homeless friends that like to be in my house till all hours of the night. And the other night, it was 3 in the morning and they were outside my house sitting out there smoking. I had to open up my door and say, "Yall have got to leave. Yall gotta go. I can't have yall parked outside of my house using drugs. I will get kicked out of here." I'm an old lady with nowhere to go. It's scary. But I would never call the police because if they find out you're a snitch, they might shoot you.

And you know, I just worry when I think about my house.

To a certain extent, I'm afraid that the city might buy this place up before I can find a private owner and find another place to go stay; because I notice that they are making more improvements on the westside. They are tearing down things and building up houses. The last I heard is that they had torn down some shops to build affordable apartments, but I don't know how true that is because every time we go around looking at apartments they are always 800, 900, and \$1000 and the most I can afford is barely at the \$800 level.

When you are poor you don't think too much on the future. I told my son that when we die we are going to have a mansion with the lord. Maybe this sounds selfish, but I said Lord, I want my mansion before I die. From one year to the next as long as I have breath in my body, I hope the Lord will bless me with a home. It doesn't even have to be a mansion....just a brick home with a beautiful bedroom.

Reality has kicked in. In 5 more years, I'm going to be 70 years old. If the Lord blesses me to see 70, I wonder how I'm going to stop working and know that social security won't give me enough to pay my bills.

What happens to people like me who can't draw retirement in our old age? We are just sort of up the river.

We Grow It On Tuck

When I met Greg, I was doing a gardening program uptown and I donated some fruit trees out to his organization- QC Family Tree. He showed me around the property, and it turns out he had some vacant space. I asked him if I could use it to build a garden. He gave me permission to use his property to build that new garden that we built out there.

From that garden we've been able to serve and share food with a lot of people in the neighborhood. From that garden I ended up sharing tomatoes with a neighbor and ended marrying her. (Laugh). Everybody loves a farmer. I grow the food!

We've found a nice sense of community and village around here. We cook together. We share meals together. What we grow, we don't market. We share it. Michelle across the street nursed a watermelon in our garden last summer and it ended up being 50 lbs.

Also, it provides a space for our neighbors, our elderly neighbors, to reminisce and tell stories about the past, about how they grew up on a farm. We grew cotton back there, and I've heard a lot of stories about how some of the elders had to pick cotton when they were younger. It's been a great experience living and growing over here.

We work with the kids in the neighborhood here too. The kids get to eat experience foods that don't typically grown in this climate like the Moringa plant and the sour leaf... the black garlic. It helps expose them to other cultures outside of their community.

Through that work we've been able to grow a market and open up accounts. We've moved into production and manufacturing of food products- right here on Tuckaseegee. We have factories that we are building now. We are able to employ people and contribute to upward mobility here on the west side. It all started here. Right here on 28208.

We spend a lot of time focusing on the threats on the west side and not paying attention to the opportunities. **There is a lot of opportunity on the west side.**

We don't teach our people the difference between need and want. We have to teach them the tools that lead to upward mobility, on how to capitalize on the growth to the west side.

I came to Charlotte after losing a child. This garden was like our communion. It was something me and my kids did together- grow food.

My son had died and I was going through a bad divorce. So, me and my daughter moved here to Charlotte. We came here to start fresh. We had plans to get an apartment, but it didn't work once we got here. So, we stayed in a hotel for a while. From there, we got split up. We had to go stay at The Relatives while I just made do. There was never a place in Charlotte for men and a child. There were lots of places for single mothers, but no spaces or services for single fathers. You get split up like you came in over the border.

At some point me and my daughter, we got a storage unit. We lived in a storage unit. We had a microwave, a DVD player, tv, a sofa bed.

We lived there.

My daughter would get up and wash and go to school every morning. Eventually we started our own weekend market in the parking lot of the storage center. We created industry wherever we would go. That's what we do.

I asked my daughter if she wanted to go home. She said no. People will think we failed, and we don't do that. She encouraged me to keep going. So, we did.

And those types of lessons are important. We are starting to lose that here. If we don't teach that, we will perpetually be victims of gentrification, food deserts and more. We've got to come together and buy our community.

There is a lot going on with how you can stay in the community, but we've got to learn how we can come together, grow and better serve our communities. I've learned that eventually everything is gonna be gone, and if you have no economic power, you will be displaced.

I've built industry. I've seen it grow from nothing. And personally, we're in the process of buying our own home. We've went from the storage unit to home ownership. We did that because we used the tools. We've literally planted seeds, nurtured them, and watched them grow. And that's my West Charlotte. I'm here for good.

Priced Out

I'm the type of woman who needs to be able to provide for myself. I need to be able to make sure that me and my son are taken care of. A few years ago, I was working at a call center making \$10 an hour. I didn't know at the time, but it's one of those call centers that has a high turnover rate, and ultimately, I ended up losing my job. I had just moved into an apartment two months

before I found myself unemployed. They say that most of us are only one missed paycheck away from homelessness, and it only took me one month of unemployment to be in that space. I was facing eviction because I was unable to make my rent.

It only took one month.

I went to the rent office and the lady who worked there was trying to help me brainstorm the different things I could do to get the money. She suggested that I try to contact a church. I wanted to do everything I could before I was put out.

I had court papers put on my door and my light bill was late. The lights weren't cut off yet, but the light bill was late, and through it all, I was still looking for a job.

Being on the verge of losing my apartment, with bills due, and running into so many dead ends, It made me feel like I wasn't going to make it. I was going to be kicked out after just two months. I felt like I wasn't able to handle my own for me and my child. It made me feel bad. It brought me down.

I just felt *real* bad. I felt like a failure.

So, I went to a church, but I was extremely nervous because I wasn't a member. I met with the pastor. I told him about my circumstances- how I lost my job.

I explained that I was doing everything that I knew how to do. I was thinking I would have to set up a table at the flea market or something. I was already looking for a job.. I was looking for any type of job- part time, full-time. It was just- It was hard.

I told him that I had \$300 saved, but the rent was \$615. He said he would go ahead and help me out, and I would need to come back three days later to get the check.

It just so happened that I was offered a job and I would need to be there on that 3rd day for work- the same day that he told me to come back and get the check.

So, my mom had to get on the bus, go across town and get the check for me. She picked it up and I was able to pay my rent.

I felt grateful and relieved. It was like a weight was lifted off of me. At least I could pay my rent and have help paying the court fees. It meant that I was able to keep a roof over me and my sons head. It meant I could stay independent and be on my own with my child and feel like a good, responsible mother.

Currently, I'm staying with family. I just moved out of an apartment that I was paying \$1100 in rent for. I couldn't afford it. It was a real struggle. My mom passed a year and 7 months ago, and she was always the one to tell me that I could come back home when I needed.

I didn't want to at the time. But now I wish I could. I can't.

So I'm staying with my family trying to get back on my feet and recover from that \$1100 rent. A lot of people are being priced out of Charlotte because rent wasn't like it is now just 4 or 5 years ago. I remember on the news a few years ago, they said in May of 2015 the rent is going to go up. And it sure did.

The apartment that I paid \$1100 for, in 2014 I would have paid like \$700. There are hardly any affordable apartments, and the ones that are, have waiting lists. So, it feels like an impossible situation.

As for right now, I'm hopeful. I'm going through a housing program to try to get the tools that I need to be able to become a homeowner. If that doesn't work, maybe I can save to try to find another apartment in the future, but it has to be under \$1000. It has to work. We've got to have somewhere of our own to stay, to call home. It has to work.

This is my West Charlotte. And I hope to be here. For Good.

Through the Fire

It was a normal day, just like any other. I woke up and got dressed. My mama took us to school. My dad went to work. My grandparents stayed back at our house. They put wood in the heater and then left that afternoon.

That afternoon, our house caught fire. My dad's friend saw the house on fire and called the fire department. They put the fire out. They put us in a hotel for two days, and my grandmother paid for a third day. After that, we had no choice. We had to go back to the house- the burnt down house. We had to live there because we didn't have anywhere else to go. We stayed there for at least about six or seven months, maybe a little longer.

I remember the smoke smell. It was unforgettable. It was lonesome. We had no electricity. It was so dark. We had no hot water. We had to get our gas heaters out. My dad had a propane tank that he bought in the house and we boiled our water to take baths and my dad's friend gave him a generator so we could have power here and there in the house. But it was hard. This was a difficult adjustment. I had to do things to keep myself busy. When I was at school I knew what

was waiting for me when I got home. And nighttime was extremely difficult because it was hot. It was so hot at night. It made it almost impossible to sleep. I was broken down. I just kept busy. I went to the park. I would go outside and help my dad. I would go over to my cousin's house. I just tried to keep busy.

My dad's friends helped us get the house fixed. It took about a year and a half. We moved back in then. Even when we got moved, it was strange. We were used to a big house, and when we moved it was to a two-bedroom house. My dad had to stay up the street in a camper. He would come down every day and check on us, and we would go to check on him, but it was just different. We were separate. It changed our family dynamic.

I felt loved and angry. Loved because we had each other. We had the help and support of each other and our family and community. I felt angry because it felt like we lost everything. We were at our lowest point at some points. It was devastating.

People have asked me if this would affect me in a bad way. They have asked me if it would make me an angry or hateful person. They have asked me if I blame my grandparents for setting our house on fire.

My answer is always no. It was a mistake, and mistakes happen. Yes, they put too much wood in the fire, but the chimney was also unstable. It wasn't all their fault.

I won't be reduced to anger because I'm an overcomer. There are people who didn't help us who could have helped us, but that doesn't matter. Because we had a lot of people there for us. We weren't alone. If it weren't for those people who reached out and lent a helping hand, this would have been a much different story. It would have taken longer for our home to get fixed. It would have cost a lot more money. We didn't have money like that, so we had to rebuild on our own. That's what we do in our community. We reach in and help each other. We don't have a lot of money, but we have a lot of pride. We made it because we didn't have any other option. This is our West Charlotte. And We are here. For Good.

One Day At A Time

Singing: Lord Give me the strength to make it one day at a time. Lord give me the strength to make it one day at a time.

That's my nana's song. I can see her now... walking through her little apartment cleaning--dusting--singing Lord give me the strength to make it one day at a time. And she's made it. She's making it the best she can.

She tells us the stories all the time about all the stuff she's been through. Her parent's, my great grandparents were share croppers. She was raised on a farm in Matthews, and every day, they did the hard, grueling work-- out in the fields from sun up to sun down. She learned hard work every day. It's something that runs through my family.

When she got married at 18 she moved to what was a black neighborhood where rent was a mere \$10.25. That was back in the 50's. That neighborhood was the historic Brookhill neighborhood. They lived a comfortable life there with both her and her husband working. She said her old apartment used to still be over there, but they tearing all that down now.

At some point her and her husband moved up north, that was until her son was born. That type of fast city life wasn't ideal for raising a boy, so she knew she wanted to come back south. Her husband wanted to stay north. He had family and friends there. So she did what she had to...packed her bags and moved back south. With the support of her family, she was goin raise him by herself.

She moved in with her daddy. The family sure did come up from the sharecropping days because he was able to buy a home. But her daddy, my great grandfather, died of a sudden from a heart attack at work. So, my nana was able to stay there with her mom--my great grandmother and my great aunt...that was until my great auntie died. At that point, the family couldn't hold onto the house no more. So, my great grandma sold the house and moved to public housing--Piedmont Court, until she died...and then two weeks later, my nana's sister died.

My nana lived through three funerals of very important family members all in the same year.

Singing: Lord Give Me the Strength to Make It One Day at A Time... One Day at A Time.

And that's kinda been the story of my nana, sticking with family, moving as a unit together, until that ain't an option no more. Family members die or something happens, and she keeps going.

She married, and then became a widow in the 90's. Ain't been married since. A few years ago, she moved over to the westside of Charlotte. She's in a neighborhood that doesn't have the best reputation, but she says she ain't had no problems.

She draws social security, and it ain't enough to make the ends meet. So she works. She's 79 and she works 40 hours a week. She don't drive. So she counts on the bus to get her to and from work. It stops not far from her apartment. And me and my family feel good knowing that when she is coming in from work at night, her neighbor, who is in law enforcement, is going out for the night shift. They pass each other, like everybody over there, just passing by as they go to and from work but looking out for each other in the same breath. And when she's not working, she's sleeping. She's gotta rest, she's almost 80 and although she's in good shape, an 80-year-old body don't quite move like a 30-year-old one.

Sometimes it bothers me that some years ago nana went through a neighborhood program to get a house. She owned her own home and then got sick so she had to sell the house. But she don't feel sorry for herself. She don't get down on it or nothing. When she talks about her future she says she likes her job. The pay ain't bad at \$10 an hour and she gets a lot of overtime in. She believes that the good lord is gonna bless her with some money. She said he told her that when she gets it she needs to pay for a little condo in cash. That way she won't have to worry about these raising rent prices. She won't have to worry about the white folks who are coming into the neighborhood gutting houses and selling them for prices that people like her can't afford on their fixed incomes. She's confident that in the same way the lord keeps her fit so she can make it to work every day, that he will provide her with a place to stay. Until that money comes in, she just goin keep making it....one day at a time.

*Singing: Lord Give Me the Strength to Make It
One Day at A Time... One Day at A Time.*



Storyteller: Juanita Green, Photo Credit Tracy Watts



Invested

I have gotten used to the names by now. I hear the whispers. I know what they call me. Gentrifier. Predatory. Slumlord. Seems like anyone who buys a house in one of these neighborhoods, with the intent to make money is vilified. And I'll be the bad guy if I need to be, but before anyone casts judgment, it's important that they understand that there are layers to this.

You see, I had a previous working relationship with a businessman who owned property on the west side. He's a real, living breathing survival and success story. He grew up over there and worked and worked until he built an empire around himself. His elderly parents still lived in the same house that they had lived in all of his life. So, being the smart business and family man that he is, he purchased the home right next to his parents when it became for sale. They were getting older, and he wanted to make sure that he could control who lived beside his parents. Unfortunately, his daddy fell sick. When he got word that his father's situation was deteriorating, he decided to offer his daddy's nurse an opportunity to rent the home next door at a low cost. It was mutually beneficial for all involved.

Eventually, his father passed away. And the nurse stayed in the next-door home. He was her landlord, and she was living in this 3-bedroom house for an extremely low price. He kept it that way, and she kept missing payments. When he finally got tired of the back and forth, he offered me...someone that he had done real estate deals with in the past, the opportunity to buy the home. So I did.

I am a licensed contractor. I buy and flip homes. I own multiple properties. So I know a good opportunity when I see one. I know that a house on the west side of Charlotte, in a neighborhood that is quickly changing, that's within gazing distance of the city's skyline is prime real estate. But I also knew and understood the history of this community. I got exactly what it meant for him to purchase the home beside his parents to keep them safe. I knew that this historically black community was home to blue collar and white-collar workers. It held onto a history of folks living there because they weren't welcome in other parts of Charlotte. When I decided to buy this home, I did so for the financial value, but the real value--the historical value--was not lost on me.

And contrary to popular opinion, I'm no tyrant. I met the woman living in the house, her and her small child, and I saw in her my sister, my cousin, my auntie. She was a single, black mom working paycheck to paycheck. I knew her reality because I know so many other people who struggle to make rent the first of the month. Also, I believe in 2nd chances, 3rd chances, and more. I believe that you give people the space that they need to be human. So I did that. I gave her a clean slate and had her sign a new lease.

I did raise the rent, \$50. I had to so that I could make sure that bills were being paid on my end. And almost immediately, she fell into her old patterns. She wouldn't pay the rent and then would dodge me for weeks. She would lie about when the payments were coming. We did this back and forth every month. It was exhausting and costly. So, one month I filed eviction papers. And wouldn't you know, she made her payment right in time, just in time to avoid eviction. But this didn't stop her from writing bad checks, skipping payments, lying about when payments were coming, and more. I was so fed up that I decided that it would be best to just sale. After all, that's what I've done in the past...buy, remodel, sell, make a profit, and then on to the next. And even though she had been a horrible tenant, I decided to offer her some financial assistance for leaving. I was going to offer her cash for her keys even though I could have easily just gone through with an eviction.

So, when I started sending potential buyers to look at the house, she would do everything in her power to prevent them from getting in, or if they did get in she would make sure that the house was a mess. I got no offers. And I knew, that to own a home in that community, where houses were selling like hot cakes, that she must have really been doing everything she could to ensure that it wouldn't sell. I found myself at the end of my rope. She was three months behind in rent and sabotaging my sale. I filed the eviction papers again, and this time she was out...but not before extending her moving process as far out as she could, trashing the place, and then calling Charlotte housing on me--even though we had kept the home up the entire time she lived there.

I had treated this woman with as much respect as possible. I kept the home up to date and safe. Her rent was at least \$300 less than what I could have charged for a 3 bedroom in that neighborhood. I held her down because I empathized with her. I wanted to be that investor who provided an affordable home to a black mother. I really wanted this to be a success story. I was trying to do the right thing. Because that's what this neighborhood and other neighborhoods like this have done for centuries in this country. How did she repay me? By not paying rent, trashing my home, and leaving me with thousands of dollars in repairs.

And I know that there is more to her actions than just negligence. I know that there are systems at play that create these types of tenants. I know all of that. But I also know that I have a business to run. I have a family of my own-- mouths to feed. I've got goals to achieve. I let myself get caught up in the desire to invest in my people and in the history of the community. But I won't get burnt like that again. This is the type of property that I can eventually sell for triple what I bought it for. I'll take money that I make from investments like these and find other ways to give back to my community. With this house, I let my feelings get caught up in preserving the history of the people. Lesson learned. From this point forward, I'm investing in the future.

A Forever Home

A few years ago, I moved from Queens, NY to Charlotte NC. It was weird for me because as soon as I moved down here, I had to get started with school. I was socially awkward. I had no friends. I would see kids running down in my grandma's neighborhood having a blast. I would just stay inside. But when I started school, I met people. I started interacting with people. I knew Charlotte would forever be my home. But it wasn't necessarily easy.

I moved down here with my grandmother, my mother, my brother and sisters. I've always, for the most part, lived with grandmother. When my mother had us, she was never mentally or physically stable to have children. She was on drugs and she just wasn't ready. If it weren't for my grandma, we would all be in foster care. I don't know where we would be. She decided to take us in because she didn't want us all to get separated.

My mom got partial custody of me and my brother during one summer. I was about ten then. We were so happy. My mom had stopped using drugs. We were like, we fixna move, we fixna settle down. We bout to be happy. We moved and lived there for like a week when my brother started to realize that my mom changed. She started back getting on drugs again. I remember one day we came home from school. We go in the refrigerator and me and my brother just standing there. There is just like old milk, and water, and eggs. Like nothing in there.

My brother would say, come on, let's just go outside. We would go outside during those hot summer days until like 8:00 at night. Like if you were to see me and my brother in the playground playing, you would think like it's just two kids in the playground having fun. But you would never think, we didn't have food. We had to wear the same clothes every day. We would have to borrow clothes from neighbors' houses. We were outside because we didn't have to think about the fact that we were hungry.

Then my mom met this man. He was a construction worker. He was cool. He gave me and my brother whatever we wanted. But it turns out it was a catch to that. He opened my mom up to new drugs. She got addicted again. One weekend my brother went to his friend's house. I was home alone with him and my mom. I was upstairs in my room chilling. Then all of a sudden, I hear tables falling, glass shattering, things being thrown. I ran downstairs and saw him push my mom. I yelled, stop..stop...get off my mama. I was hitting him the back. I was doing everything I could to get him off of my mama. He was too strong for me. I didn't know what to do. He threw me off of him, and that's when I fell. I saw him pick up a bottle and hit my momma over the head.

I jetted upstairs and called the police. The lady heard me crying. She told me to hold on, not to go downstairs or interact with him. The police came, burst down the door, and pulled him off of her. Then they had to search the house. That's when they found where my mom had her drugs. So they had to lock her up.

My brother comes running down the street from his friend's house. He was in his boxers and yelling, "where's my sister?"

The thing I remember most is them taking my mom away. It was hurtful to see her in the police car. She was locked up for a good year. My grandma had to come and get us. I didn't want to go with her. I was angry. Ever since then, I've been different. My mom would call us during that time and say she was coming to see us. She wouldn't show up. We would call her. She would call back drunk. She just wasn't able to be there for us.

My mom is clean now. She got custody of us in April. I'm in high school. I'm with her. It's good now. I'm just praying. Praying everyday that it stay the same. I'm praying everyday that she stays clean and we can just be like this. I don't want anyone to come and do what that man did to her anymore. When she tells us she meets a new man I get anxious. It's something inside of me. I hope this don't go down again. My grandma even says if this doesn't work out anymore, she can't take us again because we're too old. I can't go to foster care. Nobody wants a teenager in foster care.

And my brother- my right hand, the person I'm the closet to get locked up for 18 months. Soon after that, my dad died. My grandmother saw that I've been depressed, so she took me to therapy. I'm doing better now. I've been through a lot, but I can honestly say I've grown. I used to be so anxious and quiet and couldn't talk to anybody. Now I can go up to a complete stranger and hold a conversation. I don't know what the future holds, but I hope it can get better. I pray it can.

Home...Again

Yeaahhh...I wrote a lot of rhymes sittin on my mama's porch. Man, I got so many memories from that porch, that house. So many. It's the only home I ever knew. Most people can't say that they had the benefit of living in one house their entire life. Living on one street. It's so important to me because there are all of these aspects of my youth, teenage years, and hell even adult years that are tied to that place. Let's take a trip down memory lane.

Our house was built in '49. My mom moved into the house in the '60s, and it was the last house she lived in until she died a couple of years ago. Over 50 years in the same house. Coming up, the neighborhood was like any other hood. Over across the street was Ms. Maple-- also known as the candy lady. I could walk up the street 3 minutes and be at my grandma house. Had to be home when the street lights came on. You know, growing up a young, black king in a black neighborhood in the south. It wasn't perfect, but it was home.

And my mama loved that damn house. She worked her fingers to the bone to make sure it was kept up. She also loved the community. She loved helping people. I remember there would be Saturday mornings, I'd wake up sleepy-eyed, walk into the living room, and there be an entire family of strangers in there. She'd say, "Son, this is the Jones's. They goin stay with us for a lil bit till they get on they feet, ok?" Still half sleep, I'd wave and go get a bowl of cereal. This was very normal. She liked to help people and make sure that they had somewhere to lay their heads when they were in their times of need.

This became so important to her that she turned the one car garage into a little apartment. She did this so when people came to stay that they could have a little privacy, some dignity. That's the type of woman she was. Families, lil kids, everybody in the neighborhood knew her, because she was that kinda woman.

At some point, as I got older, and she got older, and my siblings, it was our job to help. We had to pitch in and work to make sure that we kept that house. We stayed there, payed the bills together, and worked hard to keep the house in our family. When her health declined to the point... to the point where she knew that her time on earth was coming to a close, her dying wish was for her house to go to her three kids and for us to look out for our stepfather, make sure that he was taken care of.

When I think back to the neighborhood and how it was when we were growing up. *I remember the fun.*

Summers. It was a beautiful family-oriented environment. Of course, you had drug dealers and kids standing around without stuff to do during the summer. But for the most part, it was just dope. It was home.

There was a park down the street where kids would play basketball and football. When gentrification started happening they shut that down and turned it into a boxing ring. People stopped caring when they put that there. It changed the spirit of the people. And slowly but surely, people weren't living on the west side they were just existing

It's funny because when I was working at the YMCA a white man was there. It was before my mom passed. I was telling him about my mom's condition. He asked what we were going to do with the house. He told me to hold on, because they coming.

I knew exactly what he was talking about. The letters, the calls, the fliers. Every homeowner in our area getting them. It wasn't lost on me that bright lights of the uptown Charlotte skyline are essentially in our back yard. What my mom and her neighbors, and so many other people invested in is highly valued to so many people with vested interests at this point, not because of the history and story of the people and experiences tied to this community, but because of the monetary value that it can bring to them in the near future.

And after she died, I did everything I possibly could. The house was old and needed a lot of work. A lot of work. I saw it slipping from beneath my grasp. I went to every community organization that I could think of. I did everything within my power to hold onto the home. But it needed work. Work that I could not afford on my own. I needed help. I had none. I found myself feeling helpless. Fell into a deep, dark depression. Fought like hell to pull myself out of that, and I did what so many other people are doing right now. I sold the home.

Did I get what it was worth? Absolutely not. How could I? How do you place a dollar value on the single most important physical thing tied to all of your family memories? How do you place a dollar value on the place that was home to your sweet mother for over 50 years, you and your siblings for your entire lifetime, and countless other neighbors and community members and family members who needed a little extra help?

There is no getting what it was worth. But I will get it back. I'll get it back one day. J. Cole did, so can I. And I'll use my music. I'll use my art to help other people in hoods just like mine all over the country with keeping their crib. I cannot imagine being an elder in our neighborhood, you've spent your whole life in this house and gave your all to this house, just to lose it? This is a cycle of the same place we've always been. We have a history of being erased. Our people. Being moved out of our homes. Trying to figure out the next place in life.

For me. For now. You can find me sneaking moments. When the new owners--the construction company isn't there-- I go to the house. I sit on the porch that raised me. I plan for the future and work patiently... until I can call this place home again.

Monopoly

Just before the economic downturn that threw our economy into a tailspin, a couple of years before the housing market crash, that was when me and my wife decided that we were going to invest in two rental properties on the west side of Charlotte. At the time I worked for one of the big banks, and I grew up understanding the value of home ownership, so I knew investment properties were the way to go.

Let's go back. I like the game of Monopoly. We play it a lot at my home and I like the fact that you can build by investing in properties, and you can add to the place where the property is located. In other words, the surrounding area--the community. If you keep it up. You can make it look good. You can make the community look nice. You can earn money by renting the home

out. That's always a bonus. You're owning. Ownership is key in the black community. Other people come into our community and buy and own. Why can't we come in our community and buy and own, and keep things the way we are supposed to keep it?

That's important because of property value. It's important to keep your homes up because it adds worth to your property, but more importantly, it adds value to the community.

I remember the day that we got the keys for our first property. We were excited for this new adventure. At the time we were hoping that this was just the very beginning of this entrepreneurial route. Again, Monopoly. You start out with one property. You nurture that property and then you buy another, and another, eventually you get you a hotel. Sooner or later you can buy the whole board. That was our idea behind it. It was an idea that one investment creates more and eventually, you have bought back the block. This would be something that would last, that we would pass down to our kids.

As an investor, we had to decide early on our purpose for the properties. Flipping was very popular. We had to decide, do we want to buy and hold, rent out, or do we want to buy and flip? You know, buy, improve, and sale. And our thing was, we wanted to buy and hold. We wanted to rent out.

We were trying to build something that lasts. Because we came from modest beginnings, especially me. Very humble. My parents rented for years and years. I was the last of five children and in my teens before they were ever able to begin the process of home ownership. So, I understood the value. We wanted to change that narrative and have something that we could pass on to our children.

It starts with one home. You might have a property on a street that hasn't had any type of upkeep in years. But if you take care of your place, if you keep it up, people are going to want to live there, and just maybe, you might inspire the other homeowners to do the same. No one wants to be the ugly house on the block.

My philosophy was that when people ride by, they would say that place is always kept up. If I ever need a place to stay, I want to stay there. That creates a domino effect in the community. Something as simple as keeping the grass cut, keeping the leaves raked, and cleaning the gutters gives dignity. It means that I have the pride of ownership and hopefully it transfers over to the tenant. They want to keep it up because you do.

Getting tenants. It's a process. A delicate dance. There are websites that you can list on. There was also the option to rent to section 8 tenants, which comes with a stigma attached, but I like that option because they come through and inspect your home. They hold you accountable. The property has to be kept up. And then you can just stick a sign outside. That worked for us

because both homes were on major thoroughfares in the Enderly Park neighborhood. So I would stick a sign out, and boom, the calls start coming in. That was my advertisement. I either went with tenants that I got from there or through Section 8.

Then there was the business side. You have to get paid. You have to collect rent. Monopoly, right? And I've got stories for days about that. Man. I've had some challenges. It's not easy. And section 8 renters, you hear that they are young and going to tear up your home. They aren't going to pay rent. That's not always the case. I didn't subscribe to that stigma at all because I had elderly clients on Section 8 who always paid on time and kept great care of the place. Everybody is different. I had one lady. She was always on time with the rent, she loved the place and treated it like it was her own. She planted little mums on the side of the house, had her own little garden. I was satisfied with her.

I can't skirt around the goal, make money. You want to make passive income. Income that is earned while you are sleeping. Prior to purchasing the two homes, I checked the area to see what was happening rent-wise, to see what others were charging for rent. And there is a tightrope that you must walk. You don't want to outprice the market. There was one time when one of my properties was renting for \$675. The mortgage was 5 something...so ok, we are in the black with that property.

That was before everything started to crumble. Not only did property values go down but rent went down as well. So, then I had to throw aside being in the black and just stay afloat, even if it meant I had to take a loss every month. I was staying afloat, and I was keeping someone in the property. You have to decide which is more important, charging an astronomical rent and being in the black or get something right on the borderline of staying afloat and keeping someone there. I chose the latter. It made more sense because it was more costly to evict someone. I had been there before. So, even when the economy got back to where it needed to be, I'm not going to change the price. I'm going to keep it the same. It worked. It kept someone in that property for five years.

One of the houses almost got swallowed up during the economic downturn. So, I had to sell it. It was a process. It was real tough. But we made it through. We now have one house left. And we've been offered by many investors. We are considering selling. Economically, it just makes sense. If we could keep it and maintain it from an economic standpoint, we would do it. It would be great. But it takes a toll. Our intentions going in were to build build build, and keep building, but at some point reality sets in. Things change. Eventually, we want to come back to our initial goal, but right now we are considering selling. They call a lot. I wouldn't say the calls are predatory. I've been in the game a long time. So, I understand what's going on. Monopoly.

History of QC Family Tree

Written by Mady McColm

QC Family Tree began in 2005 when our small group of friends from seminary decided that we wanted to embody our faith by practicing radical hospitality. We put down roots in West Charlotte in the Enderly Park neighborhood, determined to learn from our neighbors about living into the love of God. We believe that if Jesus lived among the poor and oppressed – that Jesus was poor and oppressed himself – then we were called to get proximate to and learn under those who live on the margins as well.

Nearly 15 years later, we have firmly planted ourselves in the Enderly Park community. The kinship bonds that we have forged in our community have turned neighbors into family. We have observed the ways that God is already moving in our community and we contribute our time and talents. The fruit of these years of life together is visible at the corner of Tuckaseegee and Parkway. There, you will find a little village where abundance is coming to life.

Cultivating community for the common good has taken many forms on Tuckaseegee Road. QC Family Tree hosts a weekly youth group, bringing the young people in the neighborhood together to learn from one another. On the grounds, you can find a community garden where herbs, fruit trees, and vegetables will be growing, and chickens will be clucking. QC Family Tree keeps creativity a focus by hosting pottery classes and facilitating storytelling events. Partnering with organizers and community leaders, QC Family Tree has joined a movement to create stable housing for low-income residents in West Charlotte as displacement threatens their housing. We provide affordable housing to several neighbors in Enderly Park. Through partnership with the West Side Community Land Trust, we are working to educate local residents about gentrification and working to empower them to resist displacement and organize for permanent affordable housing. And, like many families, the Enderly Park community sits down for a family meal at least once a month on the QC Family Tree porch.

After almost 15 years, we believe that there's still more that we can harvest from the soil at Tuckaseegee and Parkway as we work to bring about God's Kingdom in our little corner of the world.

Connect with QC Family Tree

<http://www.qcfamilytree.org/>

Facebook: The Family Tree

Instagram: @qcfamilytree

Twitter: @qcfamilytree

info@qcfamilytree.org

704-392-2346

Donations: <http://www.qcfamilytree.org/get-involved/contribute>