

The Fat Boy from A Dirt Road

A Transformative Journey To The NEW U

Vidal Raby

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FOREWORD

Coach V has given us a story to inspire us all! From the moment he began sharing his early childhood challenges, I realised this was no typical self-help book. This was no series of catchy phrases and questionable ideas. This was a real-life journey from defeat to victory. While walking us through his pain, Coach V shows us how to navigate our pain. This book is not just about battling childhood obesity, it's about figuring out who you are and taking steps to become the new you. This story provides a real-life example and gives us practical steps to benefit the kids we love and the adults they are becoming simultaneously.

Woven through every engaging page are simple steps to overcome the trauma that may have raged in our children their entire lives. This is not just a book that every parent needs to read, but teachers, clinicians, counselors; anyone who works with our youth. Coach V doesn't just help us with strategy, he teaches us the power of empathy and the pain that our children experience when it's missing. Read about Coach V's journey and you will learn to look beyond the external issues of the human body and see the value of those living inside. Begin to absorb the principles Coach V espouses and you will start to think about solutions for those you love. Sit and meditate on

Coach V's journey and you will find hope for yourself and the people you care for.

This journey, while based on a child's brave battle against obesity and shame, will help you in your work with the adults in your life. When it's all said and done, we are just kids who grew up and we carry the pain of our childhood into adulthood. Coach V's work will change the way you see children, adults, and yourself! Read Coach V's story, shed the pounds of your pain, and help others discover health, wholeness, and contentment.

Courtney McBath

Calvary Leaders Network

Norfolk, Virginia

FOREWORD

In an era defined by fast-paced lifestyles and ever-evolving technology, the pursuit of health and wellness has become both more accessible and more elusive than ever before. We find ourselves inundated with information—some of it accurate, some not—about how best to care for our bodies and minds. It is against this backdrop that this book emerges as a guiding light to become The “NEW U”.

This book is more than just a collection of tips and methods; it is a comprehensive guide that delves deep into the principles of mental, spiritual and physical health. From the importance of mental well-being and emotional resilience to the benefits of physical fitness and balanced nutrition, it offers a well-rounded approach to living a healthy life.

As you turn these pages, you will discover the interconnectedness of our physical, mental, and emotional states. The author, who is my friend and brother, Vidal Raby, has not only compiled research but he has walked the walked and he has learned how to live a Balanced Lifestyle. Vidal has discovered that true wellness is not about quick fixes or fad diets, but about sustainable lifestyle changes that promote long-term health, wealth and spiritual growth.

Whether you are at the beginning of your wellness journey or looking to deepen your existing knowledge, this book serves as an invaluable companion. It encourages you to listen to your body, nurture your mind, and embrace the journey towards a healthier, more fulfilling life.

In reading this book, you are not just gaining information; you are joining a community of individuals committed to the pursuit of becoming THE NEW U!!!

Welcome to a journey of transformation and discovery. Your path to wellness begins now and Coach Vidal Raby is beyond qualified to help you on your Journey.

Pastor Matthew K Thompson

Senior Pastor

Jubilee Christian Church

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Welcome Note

I help families and teenagers achieve holistic wellness through nutrition, exercise, and wellness education, so they can thrive. I'm like a wellness navigator for transformative health journeys.

My name is Vidal Raby; health and wellness are my passion and purpose. I am a Master Certified Health Coach and Life Coach. My heart's desire is to meet people where they are to form a partnership with them to develop a specific plan that is focused on Nutrition, Exercise, Wellness (positive mindset), and Understanding (how it all works together) to support and help people become the best versions of themselves. My target focus is helping families, teenagers, adults, and seniors. I enjoy helping my clients to be overcomers, in their various barriers and challenges in their lives to help them achieve their passions, goals, and dreams.

I grew up in rural Alabama as an overweight child and teenager. I was overweight my entire childhood and teen years until 17 years of age. I was told year after year, time after time, by family and friends, that I would not be able to lose weight. Every year, during summer break from school, I always had a vision in my mind of how I would look and would say to myself, "I'm going to lose weight this year." And year after year, I felt like a failure up until my Junior Year of

high school. At the end of my Junior Year, I weighed 260 lbs. I began my Senior Year weighing 248 lbs., and this is when I realized that I had not failed all those years but finally learned how to manage what I ate and adopted a more active lifestyle. This built my confidence level, but I still had family and friends who said that I would not lose weight. At this same time, I had thoughts of pursuing a career in the military, but to do this, I needed to go from 248 lbs. to 180 lbs. at the minimum. By my graduation, I weighed 176 lbs. and achieved my weight loss goal and more!

Due to my challenges as a teenager, I developed a real passion and desire for health and wellness. As a result, I changed my mind about military service and chose to attend college where I further educated myself about health and wellness by receiving my Associate in Applied Science in Wellness Management from Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

As an adult, I still struggled with knowing what to eat, how to exercise properly, how to keep a positive mindset, and understanding the synergy of how it all works together, so I decided to figure it out. I had to stay disciplined and positive at all times from how I ate, to exercising 3 to 4 times a week. I said to myself, "If I can incorporate all these things in my life, it will all work together." Which fast forward to today is the reason for what I do with NEW U HEALTH AND WELLNESS Coaching. Due to my own life experiences, I always had the burning desire in my heart to help other people achieve their health and wellness goals, especially teenagers. I knew that I had to have the proper education and experience in order to help others succeed and achieve their goals. After many years of searching and

seeking for the right education program that would help me achieve my goals of educating myself to help others, I discovered Dr. Sears Wellness Institute, where I became a Master Certified Health Coach. During this same time, I also became a Life Coach through New Skills Academy.

Growing up in rural Alabama, to be exact, Marengo County Hwy 69 and Hwy 44 and enduring the taunts of bullies, I carried the weight of being overweight like a heavy burden. Year after year, I battled the voices of doubt from family and friends who insisted that I would never shed the pounds. Despite their discouraging words, every summer brought renewed hope and determination. I longed for the day when I could proudly show off my transformation to visiting cousins from out of town, dreaming of the day when I would finally break free from the chains of obesity. The disappointment and pain of feeling trapped in my own body, battling dyslexia, and enduring the taunts of bullies cut deep, fueling a passion within me to prove them all wrong.

Each year, as summer break rolled around, I held onto a vision of a slimmer, healthier version of myself, promising myself that this would be the year I finally succeeded. Yet, year after year, the scale remained unchanged, and I felt like a failure. As mentioned before, it wasn't until my junior year of high school that I began to see a glimmer of hope, and despite the setbacks and doubts, I refused to give up on myself.

By the end of junior year, I still carried the weight of disappointment, tipping the scales at 260 pounds. But something shifted within

me as I entered my senior year. With newfound determination, I embarked on a journey of self-discovery, learning to manage my diet and embracing a more active lifestyle. Though the doubts of family and friends lingered, I refused to let their words define me.

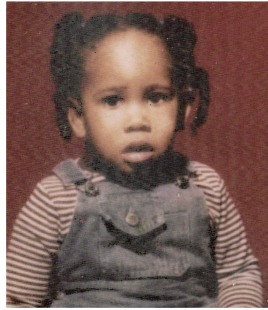
Simultaneously, thoughts of a future in the military began to take shape in my mind, but to pursue this dream, I needed to shed even more weight, aiming to reach a minimum of 180 pounds. With each pound lost, my confidence grew, fueled by a burning desire to prove my doubters wrong and achieve my goals.

As graduation approached, I stood on the precipice of a new beginning, a testament to my resilience and determination. Against all odds, I surpassed my weight loss goal, stepping onto the stage to receive my diploma at a slim and healthy 176 pounds. In that moment, I realized that my journey was not just about losing weight—it was about discovering the strength within myself to defy expectations and rewrite my own narrative.

Let the story begin!!

Chapter One

Preschool



I grew up on a dirt road; off of Highway 69, Robertson Rd to be exact; and it was along this humble beginning that my journey started. At the tender age of three, I discovered that my world was dictated not by the typical joys and wonders of childhood, but by the scale and its reflection of my body. Preschool should have been about discovery, laughter, and forming friendships. Instead, it became a challenging environment where my size distinctly marked me as different. This early distinction was difficult to grasp, even as I navigated through what should have been carefree days filled with play and learning.

Each day brought its own set of trials, from the stares and whispers of curiosity from other children to their blunt observations that

often came off as harsh judgments. “Wow, he’s big!” they would exclaim, not fully understanding the impact of their words. These remarks felt like weights, making it harder to simply exist among my peers without the constant awareness of being different. Even well-meaning teachers would comment on my size, unintentionally emphasizing it as my defining characteristic. This created an atmosphere where my physical appearance seemed to overshadow every other aspect of my personality and capabilities.

Despite these challenges, my time in preschool was not devoid of kindness and support. My parents provided a loving home where I was valued for who I was, not what I looked like. My grandfather, Clifton Raby, who owned the preschool, watched over me with a mix of concern and hope, witnessing my resilience grow day by day. These experiences taught me about the strength of character and the importance of perseverance. Even at such a young age, I was learning to navigate a world that often seemed intent on reducing me to a single aspect of my identity.

This journey through early childhood laid the foundations for understanding and overcoming adversity. As I look back, I see not just a series of challenges, but a formative period that shaped my approach to life’s obstacles. This early chapter taught me resilience and the importance of self-acceptance and these are lessons that I carry into every new encounter. Through this reflection, I also recognize the role, parents and caregivers have in shaping a child’s early experiences, highlighting the necessity to address and prevent preschool obesity by fostering environments that promote healthy physical and emotional development. By prioritizing balanced nutrition, encouraging

regular physical activity, and supporting mental well-being, parents can significantly influence their children's health trajectories, setting them on a path toward lifelong wellness.

Early Childhood Obesity: A Precursor to Diabetes in Preschoolers

Childhood obesity is a growing concern worldwide, with a significant impact beginning as early as the preschool years. Recent studies show that the prevalence of obesity among preschool-aged children has increased dramatically, setting the stage for numerous health issues, including type 2 diabetes, once considered a condition only affecting adults.

The Rise of Preschool Obesity

Obesity in preschoolers is primarily driven by a combination of poor dietary choices, lack of physical activity, and environmental and genetic factors. Children at this age are particularly vulnerable as their eating patterns and exercise habits are still being established. The prevalence of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods, increased screen time, and decreased physical play are contributing to this worrying trend.

Preschool is a critical period for growth and development. It's also the time when children begin to lay the foundation for their dietary preferences and habits around physical activity. This makes early intervention crucial to prevent obesity and its associated risks.

Link Between Obesity and Early Childhood Diabetes

One of the most severe consequences of early childhood obesity is the increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes. This condition occurs when the body becomes resistant to insulin or when the pancreas fail to produce enough insulin, leading to uncontrolled blood sugar levels. In children, this can lead to a lifetime of health complications, including heart disease, kidney damage, and even vision impairment.

Obese children have a higher likelihood of becoming obese adults, perpetuating a cycle of poor health. The connection between early obesity and diabetes is particularly concerning due to the speed at which complications develop, often appearing earlier in life compared to individuals who become obese as adults.

Strategies for Prevention

Preventing obesity in preschoolers requires a multi-faceted approach involving parents, caregivers, and community health initiatives. Here are some strategies that can help mitigate the risk of obesity and diabetes in young children:

1. **Nutrition Education:** Teaching parents and caregivers about the importance of balanced diets can help improve the eating habits of children. This includes understanding portion sizes, the benefits of fruits and vegetables, and the dangers of sugary snacks and beverages.

2. **Promoting Physical Activity:** Children should be encouraged to engage in physical activity daily. Preschools and childcare centers should integrate structured play and physical education to ensure children receive adequate exercise.

3. **Health Screenings:** Regular health screenings can help detect early signs of obesity and associated conditions. Early intervention

strategies, such as nutritional counseling or physical activity programs, can then be implemented.

4. Community and Policy Initiatives: Local governments can play a role by creating environments that support healthy living. This can include safe playgrounds, community gardens, and regulations that limit the availability of junk food in schools.

Feel free to contact me, Vidal Raby, for more information and support in tackling preschool obesity and its associated health risks. You can reach me via email at coachv@newuhealthandwellness.com, visit our website: www.newuhealthandwellness.com or call us at (617) 263-0100 or toll-free at 1(855) 226-5533.

The rise in obesity among preschool-aged children is a call to action for parents, educators, and policymakers alike. By understanding the risks associated with obesity, such as the development of early childhood diabetes, and implementing effective preventive measures, we can protect our youngest population from a lifetime of health issues. The fight against childhood obesity is not just about improving current health but ensuring a healthier future for all children.

Jeremiah 1:5-7 - *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” “Ah, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.”*

In this passage, Jeremiah speaks of being known and set apart by God even before his birth. When called to be a prophet, Jeremiah’s

objection is that he is too young, but God reassures him that his youth is not a barrier to fulfilling the purposes God has for him.

This scripture shows that God's call and equipping can come at any age, emphasizing that young children, too, can be empowered by God for great tasks.

Chapter Two

Kindergarten Through Fifth Grade



Starting kindergarten, introduced a new chapter in my life. It was one filled with the usual mix of excitement and nerves typical for any child, but for me, it also carried a heavier burden. With my blanket and mat ready for nap time, I found myself among unfamiliar faces, many of whom quickly noticed my size. Though comments about needing two mats stung, those early days also brought moments of normalcy. Bringing my own lunch allowed me to blend in slightly with my peers, offering a sense of belonging amidst the challenges. Even though not everyone was unkind, the comments

and jokes about my weight unmistakably highlighted how different I was. This time in my life wasn't solely about making new friends or acquiring knowledge; it was also a profound lesson in recognizing just how much I physically stood out from my peers.

Growing up in the rural side of Alabama, there were certain beliefs that everyone seemed to accept without a second thought. I often heard whispers about how my family's genetics meant I was destined to be big, and this notion weighed heavily on my young mind. But deep inside, I felt a spark of resistance against this seemingly unavoidable fate. With a determined spirit and a hopeful heart, I decided that I wouldn't simply accept this predestined path. Instead, I chose to carve out my own journey, fueled by the belief that I could shape my future, regardless of any genetic expectations.

As the year progressed, days in kindergarten were filled with typical activities—learning ABCs, numbers, and enjoying coloring sessions—which offered some respite and moments of joy. These experiences, good and bad, were not just about academic learning but about beginning to understand and navigate the complexities of self-identity and acceptance from a very young age.

As I graduated from kindergarten and stepped into first grade, I was met with new academic challenges. Mathematics came naturally to me, but reading and English were a different story. I found myself struggling to grasp these subjects, a struggle that was both confusing and frustrating at such a young age. Fortunately, I had a compassionate first-grade teacher who assured my mother that with time and support, I would improve. She committed to working closely

with me, providing the encouragement I needed to persevere. Even with all these challenges, grasping the importance of hard work and witnessing its real rewards was a tough lesson for a first grader to learn. Yet, I persevered, pushing through the hurdles of learning while also dealing with my weight, which made my school days even more complicated. Despite it all, I stayed strong and kept going, determined to overcome every obstacle in my path.

The move to first grade not only highlighted my academic struggles but also intensified the personal challenges I faced. The realization that I was much larger than my peers continued to affect my self-esteem and sense of belonging. This year also marked the first time I saw peers repeating a grade, which added to the complexity of my emotions. Some of my classmates, who were expected to move up to the second grade, ended up staying back and joining me in first grade. This was a puzzling situation for me at the time. As I navigated these early academic and social hurdles, all I desired was to keep up and stay in my appropriate grade level, striving to overcome the obstacles in both my learning and personal life.

As I transitioned into second grade, the academic challenges became more pronounced. I was grappling with reading and understanding English at a kindergarten level, which made every classroom activity and lesson a struggle. During this time, the possibility of being held back was first brought to my parents' attention. My teacher expressed concerns about my progress but also believed in my potential to improve if given the chance to advance. My mother, a steadfast advocate for my education, pushed back against the idea of holding me back. She believed in my ability to catch up, despite

my difficulties with English and Reading. This advocacy allowed me to move forward, though I was still puzzled by the discussions about my academic performance and the looming challenges that were anticipated as I approached third grade.

The pressure of my academic situation was compounded by the social challenges I faced due to my physical appearance. Remarks from classmates and even teachers about my size made second grade an emotionally taxing year. The teasing bordered on bullying, making school a daunting experience. Despite this, I was determined not to let these challenges define my academic journey. By the end of the year, tests revealed I was still performing at a kindergarten level in English, prompting further recommendations for me to repeat a grade. However, armed with my mother's support and her belief in my potential, I advanced to third grade. This progression was filled with apprehension, but also a quiet determination to overcome the obstacles that lay ahead, both academically and personally.

The third grade marked the most challenging year of my early education, shaping my understanding of resilience and determination. At Linden Elementary, the stakes were unusually high; the teachers operated with a clear mandate—if a student was not performing at grade level in Reading Comprehension, retention was a likely outcome. This policy put immense pressure on students like me who were grappling with academic challenges. As the year progressed, the specter of repeating the grade loomed large, compounded by a teaching approach that felt more like oversight than engagement. Amidst this, a significant test—the ACT—was administered to gauge our academic standing, adding to the already high stakes. My mother,

however, stood as my steadfast advocate. When my teacher suggested retention, my mother fought back again, ultimately deciding to transfer me to AL Johnson Elementary in hopes of a better educational environment. This move, fraught with its own challenges, was pivotal; it offered me a fighting chance to progress, a chance that would eventually see me graduating with my peers in 1995.

A pivotal meeting early in January between my third-grade teacher and my mother, set the course for the remainder of my school year. The teacher expressed her intention to retain me, citing my struggles with reading at a third grade level. Despite this, my mother believed I could improve and advocated for my advancement. This disagreement resulted in my transition to AL Johnson, where I faced new challenges but also received a fresh start. The move to AL Johnson was not just a change in environment but also a significant shift in my academic and personal journey. As I navigated this new setting, the fear of retention continued to linger, yet it was met with a newfound resolve to overcome the obstacles ahead. As I moved forward with a mix of hope and determination, this period of my life was not just about academic survival but also about beginning to address deeper issues, including my health and self-image.

The fourth grade brought a double challenge my way, as I navigated both academic struggles and began to face my weight concerns for the very first time. Enrolling at AL Johnson Elementary as the largest kid in school, I constantly felt the weight of embarrassment and scrutiny, which severely impacted my ability to focus and learn. This was the year when the reality of my weight truly dawned on me, casting a long shadow over my school days. Despite these chal-

lenges, my mother remained a pillar of support, regularly attending PTA meetings and discussing my progress with teachers who, unlike before, did not suggest holding me back but acknowledged my struggles. They assigned extra work to help me catch up, though often this was overwhelming. Socially, the year was just as tough; and being noticeably bigger than my peers made me a frequent target for teasing, reinforcing my feelings of isolation and frustration.

Entering third grade at Linden Elementary, I was acutely aware of the daunting reputation of the grade's teachers and the rigid policies regarding academic performance. The rule was harsh but clear: suggestions for retention in earlier grades often culminated in actual retention by third grade, depending on the teacher's discretion. This was not just a possibility but a palpable fear, as I knew of several classmates who were already a year or two behind. The pressure was incessant, and the stories I had heard did little to ease my anxiety. From the beginning, the academic challenges were intense, making it difficult for me to grasp and keep up with the coursework. By the end of the first semester, my report card reflected my struggles, failing grades that seemed to confirm my worst fears.

Amidst these difficulties, I adopted a growth mindset to face challenges head-on, rather than avoid them. This approach was tested daily, not just by academic pressures but also by my self-awareness regarding my health. For the first time, I started monitoring my weight actively, influenced partly by a teacher's suggestion to ride my bike in the evenings—a time that was supposed to be for relaxation, not stress. However, managing my diet proved complicated, as I lacked the guidance to make healthier eating choices consistently.

The fourth grade was also the year I began wearing glasses, adding another layer of self-consciousness to my struggles. Yet, despite these hurdles, I pushed through, ending the year with a promotion to fifth grade, a testament to my resilience and the unwavering support of my family and educators who believed in my potential to overcome the obstacles I faced.

During the summer between fourth and fifth grades, I was determined to address my weight issue for the first time. Armed with a new mindset, I attempted various strategies to lose weight, but as a young student, my efforts were often naive and unguided. Nutrition and calorie management were concepts that neither my family nor I, fully understood. We didn't know how many calories to consume, the best times to eat, or effective exercise routines. This lack of knowledge meant that despite my best intentions, I saw no real progress by the time school resumed. Adding to my challenges, I started the fifth grade at AL Johnson Elementary feeling self-conscious about wearing large, conspicuous glasses, which I often hid under my desk to avoid further bullying and unwanted attention.

Fifth grade was a pivotal year, not only because of my personal struggles but also due to the looming transition to a new school system. AL Johnson served students only through fifth grade; after that, the options were stark—a direct move to a high school environment for grades six through twelve or switching to a middle school setup like George P. Austin Middle School, which catered to grades six through eight. I weighed my options carefully, fearing the former option, where older high school students might target me. After thoughtful discussions with my mother, and despite her initial

reservations, I convinced her to let me return to the Linden school system, specifically to attend George P Austin Middle School. This decision was driven by the hope of a more supportive environment and the chance to reunite with old friends from earlier grades.

Reflecting on the challenges I faced, I was both anxious and hopeful about moving to George P Austin Middle School. The elementary years had been marked by isolation due to my size and the relentless teasing that came with it. The prospect of entering a middle school, with its different social dynamics and educational expectations, offered a fresh start. As fifth grade drew to a close, I remember the mixed feelings of saying silent farewells to my classmates at AL Johnson, wondering if our paths would cross again before high school. The transition was filled with both uncertainty and determination, signalling a new chapter where I could potentially escape the identity that had defined me throughout my elementary years. This upcoming change was a crucial step, one that I hoped would bring new friendships and a more accepting environment as I continued to navigate the challenges of growing up.

Addressing the Crisis of Obesity, Overweight, and Learning Disabilities in Children from Kindergarten to Fifth Grade

Navigating the challenges associated with childhood obesity, overweight issues, and learning disabilities from kindergarten through fifth grade, is crucial to foster a healthy developmental trajectory for our children. Recent years have shown a disturbing rise in these conditions, which not only compromise physical health but also critically impact academic performance and emotional well-being. Currently, about one in five school-aged children are dealing with

obesity or are overweight, and a considerable portion of this demographic also struggles with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These conditions can severely hinder a child's ability to learn and socialize effectively, creating barriers that extend beyond the classroom into every aspect of their life.

The root causes of these widespread issues often lie in the combination of unhealthy dietary habits and a lack of physical activity, exacerbated by modern families' busy schedules and the easy accessibility of processed foods and sugary drinks. Furthermore, socio-economic factors significantly influence these challenges, as children in underserved communities may lack access to fresh and nutritious food options. It is imperative for parents to take proactive steps to combat these crises. This includes instilling healthy eating habits by ensuring meals are well-balanced with plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, and reducing the intake of unhealthy snacks and drinks. Additionally, fostering an active lifestyle is essential; encouraging regular physical activity through sports, outdoor play, or even simple activities like walking or biking can profoundly impact a child's overall health and cognitive development.

Moreover, addressing learning disabilities early on is critical. Parents should be vigilant for signs of such challenges and seek timely assessments. Collaborating closely with educational professionals to tailor individual support plans in school can greatly enhance a child's learning experience and outcomes. Advocacy plays a crucial role here—parents must advocate for their children's needs to ensure they receive the necessary support and interventions. For families seeking

guidance on integrating nutrition, exercise, and wellness strategies to improve their children's health and academic performance, resources like NEWU Health and Wellness are invaluable. By visiting NEWU HealthandWellness.com or reaching out via email to coachv@newuhealthandwellness.com, parents can access expert advice and support tailored to their specific needs. This holistic approach to health and education is vital for empowering our children to succeed and thrive in all aspects of their lives, setting them on a path to a healthier and more fulfilling future. As we move forward, let's not only reflect on the challenges but also celebrate the potential for significant change and improvement in our children's lives.

On to middle school, I loved attending George P. Austin Middle School in Linden, Alabama; those days were great and challenging times for me!!

The next chapter will tell you all about those times!

Chapter Three

Days at George P. Austin Middle School



I stepped into sixth grade at George P. Austin Middle School. During the sun-drenched months leading up to middle school, my heart was ablaze with the desire to transform myself. As the summer unfolded, I daydreamed about stepping into George P. Austin Middle School with a slimmer physique and without the glasses that had become a part of my identity. These were not mere fleeting thoughts but deep-seated yearnings for a fresh start, an overhaul of my appearance that I secretly hoped would materialize. Yet,

deep down, there was a whisper of realism reminding me that these changes might remain just out of reach.

Amidst this backdrop of hope and hesitation, I embarked on a quest for change. The infamous cabbage diet became my experiment of choice—a regime promising weight loss by indulging in as much cabbage as one’s heart desired. However, this venture quickly unraveled into a chaotic mess, leaving me disillusioned, but not defeated. My motivations were not solely anchored in self-improvement; but the anticipation of reuniting with familiar faces from elementary school and the desire to leave a lasting impression in this new chapter, fuelled my endeavors.

As the gates of George P. Austin Middle School welcomed me into sixth grade, I was met with a cocktail of emotions. The excitement of rekindling old friendships clashed with the harsh reality of schoolyard taunts, branding me the “fat four-eyed kid.” This jarring introduction to adolescence, at the tender age of twelve, was a pivotal moment. It marked the beginning of a journey filled with challenges, but also with the promise of growth. I stood at the threshold of thirteen, ready to navigate the complexities of middle school life, armed with hopes of transformation and the resilience to face whatever laid ahead.

As I pondered the idea of joining the football team, sharing these thoughts with classmates was out of the question. Their mockery was inevitable, their taunts ready: ‘Ha, too fat to even consider playing fullback,’ they’d jeer. The labels thrown at me were unkind and relentless; I was deemed too “soft” and “fat,” merely inflating the

numbers on my jersey rather than contributing any real value to the team. Even the football coach joined in, sparing no opportunity to point out my inadequacies. When spring practice rolled in, it was far from a laughing matter. Facing off against players who were not just a year but two to three years my senior was daunting. The transition from sixth to seventh grade was marked by these challenges, both on and off the field. My admiration for professional players like William “The Refrigerator” Perry – a defensive lineman celebrated for his size – offered a glimmer of hope, yet the constant refrain that I was “too soft” and “afraid of contact” hammered away at my spirit. The relentless pressure and negative feedback gradually eroded my love for the game, embedding a deep-seated aversion to football, driven not by personal desire but by the overwhelming consensus that my physique destined me for the sport. The undue pressure placed on me by those around me, including family, was a burden no child or teenager should bear, transforming what should have been an enjoyable pursuit into a source of stress and self-doubt.

The allure of middle school was a mix of hope and trepidation, promising a fresh start and the opportunity to join the football team, despite being surrounded by a sea of Dallas Cowboys enthusiasts. My heart clung to the dream of playing, even as I knew my physical stature might limit my participation in certain positions. As the season progressed, the reality of football became apparent through grueling practices that highlighted my physical limitations—I couldn’t manage a single pull-up or keep pace with my teammates during mile runs. These athletic challenges were mirrored in the classroom, where I struggled academically, further diminishing my self-confidence.

Yet, despite the hurdles of sixth grade, my resolve did not waver. Fuelled by a deep-seated determination, I strove to improve both academically and athletically, my efforts gradually paying off as my GPA began to rise. The dream of participating in spring football became a tangible goal, driven by my unwavering support for the San Francisco 49ers and a passion for the game that burned brightly, despite the setbacks. This blend of academic dedication and athletic ambition underscored my journey through middle school, a testament to my resilience in the face of adversity and my commitment to overcoming the challenges that lay ahead.

Once spring football concluded, I harbored the belief that the sport would naturally lead to weight loss. Contrary to expectations, my weight actually increased, tipping the scales at 212 pounds. This added to the taunts about my size and heightened my concerns about academic performance as I transitioned to seventh grade. Despite these fears, I successfully completed sixth grade and advanced, filled with renewed aspirations for the summer break. The journey through sixth grade was marked by struggles and the looming threat of repeating the year, yet it also became a period of significant personal growth. A pivotal moment that summer was my baptism, a profound experience that fortified my faith and resilience. This spiritual milestone was a testament to my ability to navigate through life's challenges, reinforcing my determination to pursue my goals relentlessly. As I looked towards the future with optimism, I was reminded that through faith and perseverance, overcoming adversity and achieving dreams was within reach.

Seventh grade presented itself as a year of introspection and unfulfilled aspirations, particularly in the ongoing battle with my weight. Transitioning from sixth grade at 212 pounds to seventh grade at 221 pounds was a significant blow to my self-esteem, especially with the anticipation of the football season. The sport I had once looked to as a means of transformation instead became a source of discomfort. Practices in the searing heat were torturous, not just physically due to my inability to keep pace with my peers, but emotionally as well, as the ridicule from others intensified. This period was marked by a duality of thoughts; on one hand, the societal expectation that my physique was suited for football, and on the other, my private dreams of joining the military as a fighter pilot, ambitions I dared not voice for fear of further mockery. It was also a time of personal growth, as conversations about interests and attractions began to surface, marking the initial steps towards adolescence. However, this exploration was marred by an embarrassing rejection, reinforcing the negative self-image I battled daily.

In the midst of these challenges, seventh grade also bore moments of brightness, particularly in the academic realm. Mr. Skill, a mathematics teacher I first encountered in sixth grade, became a beacon of inspiration. His unique teaching methods and the practical application of basic mathematics left an indelible mark on me, nurturing my affinity for numbers. This positive academic experience was a sharp contrast to my struggles with English and Language Arts, subjects that felt insurmountable and disconnected from my interests. History, too, failed to capture my attention, rendering it another academic hurdle. Despite these academic ups and downs, seventh grade felt like a plateau in my journey, particularly in terms of my weight, which

fluctuated minimally but never decreased significantly. The mockery that ensued during PE classes, especially the dreaded weigh-ins, added to the year's trials, underscoring the constant scrutiny of my physical appearance.

As seventh grade unfolded, it was not just a battleground for personal and academic trials but also a period of setting the groundwork for future aspirations. The support from educators like Mr. Skill provided a glimmer of hope in the midst of struggle, encouraging my commitment to academic improvement. However, the challenges of English and Reading, along with the mixed emotions surrounding football, painted a complex picture of my middle school experience. The teasing I endured, both on the football field and off, continued to test my resilience. As the year progressed, the looming transition to eighth grade and the subsequent jump to high school added a new layer of pressure. This stage of my life was not only about navigating the academic demands and extracurricular challenges but also about confronting personal insecurities and societal expectations. Despite the hurdles, seventh grade was a crucial step in my journey, one that taught me the value of perseverance, the importance of nurturing one's passions, and the strength to face adversity head-on.

Entering eighth grade, I was buoyed by a myriad of aspirations; to emerge a slimmer version of myself, to excel in football by playing both offense and defense, and ultimately, to bask in the glory of starting roles that I had long coveted. Yet, as the year unfolded, none of these aspirations materialized. I found myself relegated to the sidelines, an eighth grader who didn't start in any position, which was a significant blow to my self-esteem. The disappointment was

palpable—I had poured my heart and soul into training, hoping to make a mark. The notion of quitting haunted me, prompting a heart-to-heart with my mother. But family expectations were clear; quitting wasn't an option for someone “too big” not to play football. This advice, albeit well-intentioned, felt more like a critique than encouragement, leaving me to question the motivations behind their words and my own desires.

The end of eighth grade was a stark reminder of the gap between my dreams and reality. Despite my efforts, I had not shed any weight, nor had I secured a coveted starting position in football. The transition from being a senior in junior high to stepping into high school was supposed to be a milestone, yet it felt overshadowed by a sense of personal failure. Weighing in at 228 pounds during the middle school graduation, I was acutely aware of the eyes on me, the judgment, and the embarrassment that clung to me like a second skin. The journey through eighth grade, fraught with unmet expectations and personal challenges, was a lesson in resilience, albeit a tough one to swallow at the time.

Reflecting on my middle school experience, it's clear that those years were foundational, shaping me into the person I am today. Middle school, with its trials and triumphs, taught me about perseverance, self-acceptance, and the importance of following one's path, regardless of external expectations or criticisms. These lessons were instrumental in guiding me towards my ultimate purpose—becoming a health and life coach. My passion for helping families and teenagers navigate the tumultuous years of junior high and middle

school was born from my own experiences, a testament to the transformative power of facing and overcoming personal challenges.

Beyond the struggles with football and weight, eighth grade also brought an unexpected opportunity to explore a new sport—basketball. Despite the initial thrill, the mere idea of trying out was met with skepticism, even from the coach himself.

Thankfully, my mother's wisdom spared me from what could have been another avenue of embarrassment. Instead, the focus shifted to academic achievements and the looming Alabama State graduation test, a daunting hurdle for anyone transitioning from middle school to high school. This time was a blend of relief and excitement; saying goodbye to the relentless academic pressures and the rigid social hierarchy of middle school felt like lifting a weight off our shoulders. Yet, the journey ahead promised its own set of challenges, sparking a sense of anticipation for what was to come.

As I transitioned to high school, the weight of past disappointments and the trepidation of future obstacles melded into a determination to carve out a new path for myself. Middle school, for all its hardships, was a crucible that forged a resilience and clarity of purpose within me. The experiences that were once sources of pain and embarrassment, transformed into pillars of strength. They taught me the invaluable lesson that success is not just about reaching a destination, but about the journey and the growth that occurs along the way. This realization, nurtured through the trials of middle school, became the bedrock of my commitment to guiding others

through their formative years, ensuring they find their own paths to success and fulfillment.

As I reflect on my journey through George P. Austin Middle School, I can't help but recognize the profound impact it had on shaping my identity and aspirations. Hidden beneath a facade of conformity, my dreams of becoming either a comedian or a fighter pilot simmered quietly, undeterred by the external pressures and expectations that surrounded me. These dreams, albeit kept to myself, served as a silent beacon, guiding me toward an unknown future as I prepared to transition to high school. This preparation was not just about academics; it was comprehensive, a mental and physical one, gearing up for a new chapter that promised even greater challenges. The summer before high school became a crucial period of transformation, driven by a mix of peer pressure and personal goals. The relentless pursuit of losing weight, a goal that always seemed just out of reach, and the anticipation of playing high school football, —more out of expectation than desire, —loomed large in my thoughts.

As I ventured into high school, the diversity and magnitude of challenges were immediately apparent. Encountering upperclassmen for the first time, including seniors whose presence was both intimidating and awe-inspiring, required a level of mental preparation I had not previously encountered. This transition period was marked by a continuous effort to adapt and thrive amidst a sea of new faces and heightened expectations. Looking back, George P. Austin Middle School offered more than just academic lessons; it was a crucible of personal growth, preparing me for life in ways I could not have anticipated. The experiences, both good and bad, laid a foundation of

resilience and adaptability, equipping me with the tools to navigate the complexities of high school and beyond.

Fighting Childhood Obesity in Middle School: A Parent's Guide to Success

Middle school, spanning grades six through eight, is a critical period in children's development, encompassing academic, physical, and emotional growth. During these years, children often face an increased risk of obesity due to a more sedentary lifestyle and greater exposure to unhealthy food choices. The combination of longer hours spent sitting in classrooms and a newfound independence in their dietary decisions can lead children to consume more fast food and calorie-dense snacks. These habits significantly contribute to rising obesity rates, which can lead to severe health issues like type 2 diabetes and hypertension, as well as psychological effects such as decreased self-esteem and potential social isolation. It's imperative for parents to intervene with appropriate guidance and support to encourage healthier habits during this vulnerable stage.

To effectively combat childhood obesity and promote a healthier future, parents are encouraged to foster an environment that emphasizes balanced living. This includes encouraging daily physical activities like sports, dancing, or cycling to help children achieve at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each day. Proper nutrition is equally crucial; parents should aim to provide meals rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, while limiting sugary beverages and processed snacks. Involving children in meal planning and cooking can also help them understand nutritional values and make healthier choices independently. Moreover, maintaining a sup-

portive home environment that promotes a positive body image and open communication about health and self-care is essential for mental well-being. If you're looking for additional support in navigating these challenges, or if you need coaching for your child's nutrition, exercise, and overall wellness, please contact me at NEWU Health and Wellness. You can visit us at www.newuhealthandwellness.com or email me directly at coachv@newuhealthandwellness.com

By partnering with parents, schools, and health professionals, we can work together to equip our children with the habits they need to lead healthy and successful lives throughout middle school and beyond.

Addressing the Impact of Childhood Obesity in Middle School

As childhood obesity continues to escalate, its impact on children transitioning into middle school is increasingly profound. Recent studies reveal that a concerning number of middle schoolers are now grappling with being classified as overweight or obese. This trend brings about significant health and emotional challenges.

Overweight adolescents face myriad challenges, from physical health issues such as increased risks of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension, to emotional struggles including low self-esteem, depression, and isolation due to social stigma and bullying. This critical phase in their lives, which should be marked by growth and learning, instead becomes a time of significant hardship, impacting their ability to thrive academically and socially.

To address this escalating crisis, a robust, multi-faceted approach is essential. Schools and communities must prioritize comprehensive education on nutrition and physical activity, ensuring that healthy lifestyles are promoted from an early age. Access to nutritious meals in schools, initiatives encouraging active lifestyles, and programs that foster a supportive environment for physical wellness are crucial. Parents and caregivers play a pivotal role and must be actively involved in promoting health at home through regular family meals, reduced screen time, and fostering environments that encourage physical activity. Additionally, tackling broader socio-economic and cultural factors that contribute to obesity is essential for making a lasting impact. Schools should also strive to cultivate a positive, inclusive atmosphere that supports all students. This includes implementing strong anti-bullying policies, providing accessible counseling services, and promoting body positivity to combat obesity-related stigma and help all students feel valued and accepted. In sum, combating childhood obesity in middle school students requires dedicated effort from families, educators, healthcare professionals, and policymakers alike. By uniting to promote healthy habits and supportive environments, we can empower our youth to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives now and into their future.

Chapter Four

Entering Linden High School Freshman & Sophomore Years



The transition from summer to the ninth grade heralded a period of profound self-reflection and ambition. As the warm, languid days of summer gradually gave way to the structured rigors of high school life, I found myself standing at a crossroads, both literally and metaphorically. The summer had been envisioned as a transformative phase, a time when I would finally take the reins of my physical health and academic pursuits into my own hands. Armed with a sense of unwavering determination, I embarked on what I be-

lieved to be a life-altering journey. I had envisioned myself diligently lifting weights on my Uncle Roland's back porch, the metallic clang of determination marking my progress. Yet, despite my best efforts, the anticipated transformation remained elusive. In my naivety, I had clung to the notion that significant change could be achieved within the span of a mere 30 days. This period, I soon realized, was but a fleeting moment in the grand scheme of a lifelong journey toward health and wellness. At the tender age of fourteen, guidance in these matters was scarce; the concepts of health and wellness remained abstract, explained to me only in the simplest of terms. I was advised to embrace running, an activity I loathed with every fiber of my being, as a panacea for my woes.

As the summer waned, so did my initial enthusiasm too. The aspiration to lose weight and improve my physical fitness was overshadowed by a myriad of challenges and societal pressures. Among these was the dread of entering high school adorned with glasses, an accessory that, in my mind, only accentuated the stigma of being overweight. The prospect of high school football, a revered institution in Alabama, loomed large, yet it brought its own set of expectations and prejudices. In a world where athleticism was king, I feared that my physical appearance would relegate me to the sidelines, both literally and figuratively. Despite participating in summer football practice—a prelude to the trials of high school athletics—I could not shake the feeling of being an outsider, a sentiment that was seemingly confirmed by the whispers and stares of upperclassmen. Nevertheless, as summer drew to a close, I clung to a solitary consolation: I had not gained any weight, maintaining a precarious status quo at

225 pounds. This small victory, however fleeting, offered a glimmer of hope as I ventured into the unknown territory of ninth grade.

The onset of ninth grade at Linden High School was marked by a confluence of emotions and challenges. It was a time of introspection and struggle, where my aspirations for self-improvement were met with the harsh realities of adolescence. The academic arena proved to be a battleground, fraught with difficulties that extended beyond the curriculum. My struggles were compounded by poor eyesight, a vulnerability that did not escape the notice of my peers. The taunts and jeers, though hurtful, failed to dampen my spirit. Instead, they fueled a resolve to persevere, to transcend the labels and limitations imposed upon me. This period of my life was characterized by a relentless pursuit of acceptance and achievement, a journey marked by setbacks yet propelled by an unwavering belief in the possibility of transformation. Amidst the trials and tribulations of ninth grade, the seeds of resilience were sown, laying the foundation for a future defined not by the weight of past failures, but by the strength of enduring hope.

Navigating the tumultuous waters of my freshman year at high school was akin to walking a tightrope, balancing between the desire for normalcy and the harsh reality of adolescent cruelty. The lunchroom, a battleground of judgment and whispered taunts, became a place of dread. Comments like “you don’t need lunch” or “he’s big enough as it is” were commonplace, especially from upperclassmen who seemed to take a perverse delight in highlighting my struggles with weight. The simple act of purchasing an extra slice of pizza-on-pizza day became a source of public scrutiny and embarrass-

ment. This relentless teasing pushed me and a few other freshmen to seek refuge under the bleachers, where we found solace in basketball, away from the critical eyes of our peers. This clandestine retreat, though a respite, was not without its drawbacks. In our effort to escape the lunchroom's harshness, we inadvertently adopted unhealthy habits, like snacking from vending machines, which further compounded my nutritional misunderstandings and weight issues. This cycle of avoidance and unhealthy compensations continued unabated, a silent testament to the struggles many of us faced, until a teacher's intervention forced us back into the very environment we sought to escape.

My physical education (PE) classes were another source of deep anxiety, not just for the physical exertion they demanded, but for the vulnerability they exposed. Stripping down to participate in activities became a monumental task, overshadowed by my self-consciousness about gynecomastia aka man – boobs—a condition that elicited cruel nicknames and laughter, further isolating me from my peers. Despite the agony, the fear of failing PE loomed larger, compelling me to partake with a heavy heart. Outside the gym, an opportunity to diverge from the beaten path presented itself in the form of a trade school program. Despite my family's history in various trade roles such as carpentry, and brick masonry, my ambitions lay elsewhere, in realms filled with laughter or the cockpit of a fighter jet. However, the stigma of expressing such dreams kept them buried deep within, unvoiced and unexplored.

I wrote this following article, to explain what Gynecomastia aka “Man Boobs” is.

Understanding Gynecomastia: What You Need to Know About "Man Boobs"

Gynecomastia, often known as "man boobs," is a condition where males develop enlarged breast tissue. Despite being common, there are misunderstandings and stigma surrounding it. This article aims to explain what gynecomastia is, what causes it, its symptoms, and available treatments.

What is Gynecomastia?

Gynecomastia means males have swollen breast tissue, resembling breasts. It's not dangerous, but it can cause distress. It can occur in one or both breasts and may feel like a lump under the nipple.

Causes of Gynecomastia:

1. **Hormonal Imbalance:** Changes in hormone levels, like more estrogen than testosterone, can cause gynecomastia. This can happen during puberty or later in life due to aging or certain health issues.
2. **Medications:** Some drugs, including steroids, antidepressants, and medications for prostate cancer, can affect hormones and lead to gynecomastia.
3. **Health Conditions:** Liver or kidney problems, thyroid issues, and certain tumors can disrupt hormone balance and cause gynecomastia.

Symptoms of Gynecomastia:

- Enlarged breast tissue
- Swelling and tenderness in the breast area
- A lump or firm mass under the nipple

- Uneven breast appearance

Treatment Options:

1. Observation: Sometimes, gynecomastia goes away on its own, especially during puberty.
2. Medications: Doctors may prescribe drugs to adjust hormone levels and reduce breast tissue.
3. Surgery: In severe cases, surgery may be recommended to remove excess breast tissue.

In summary, Gynecomastia, also called "man boobs," is when males have enlarged breast tissue. While it is not usually harmful, it can affect self-esteem. Knowing its causes, symptoms, and treatments is essential for support and understanding.

The trade school experience, though intended as a vocational boon, quickly became another arena for ridicule and derision. Mingling with students from across the county, I found myself yet again to be the subject of newfound bullying, reinforcing the isolation and self-doubt that had become my constant companions. Despite the program's promise of a reprieve from PE and its associated humiliations, it introduced a new set of challenges. The relentless teasing about my appearance and the dread of being exposed to further mockery at PE were reminders of my struggles. Yet, amidst these trials, there were moments of discovery—a carpentry class that piqued my interest, hinting at potentials and pathways previously unconsidered. These experiences, both bitter and sweet, were formative, shaping my understanding of myself and the world around me.

As my freshman year drew to a close, the specter of summer loomed on the horizon, a beacon of hope and renewal. With the end of the school year came reflections on the past months' trials and tribulations, from the taunts endured in the lunchroom to the challenges faced in trade school. Yet, amidst these reflections, a determination took root—a resolve to confront the coming summer with a renewed vigor for change. Setting goals became a mantra; losing weight, passing the driving test, and embracing the challenges ahead became focal points of my ambition. This resolve was not born out of a desire to conform to the expectations of others but from a deep-seated belief in my ability to redefine my narrative. The journey through my freshman year, fraught with adversity, was also a journey of self-discovery, laying the groundwork for a future where dreams deferred could finally take flight, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of daunting odds.

As the summer bridged the gap between ninth and tenth grade, it brought with it a host of challenges and aspirations. I was on the precipice of becoming a sophomore at Linden High School, but before I could embrace that title, there was a personal mission I had set for myself. The memories of that summer are etched in my mind with vivid clarity, marked by a blend of determination and setbacks. I had set my sights on obtaining my learner's permit, a goal that had previously slipped through my fingers when I first attempted the driving exam in April, shortly after turning 15. The failure had stung, but it only fueled my resolve to conquer the test. Armed with a newfound focus, I dedicated the early summer weeks to poring over the driving manual, determined to not let the opportunity elude me again. By mid-July, my efforts bore fruit—I passed the driving test,

albeit barely. This victory was a beacon of hope, igniting a sense of positivity and confidence within me. Inspired, I threw myself into a regimen of jogging and football practice, despite knowing the limitations of my dietary habits. The summer was a whirlwind of physical activity and personal growth, culminating in a modest weight loss of three pounds. Yet, the triumph of obtaining my learner's permit and the anticipation of driving in tenth grade filled me with an optimism that outweighed the scale's modest concession.

The summer's trials and triumphs laid a foundational lesson in resilience and the nuanced balance of success and setbacks. Embarking on the journey with a dual focus on health and academic improvement, I encountered the harsh reality that change is neither swift nor easy. Despite a rigorous routine of running and weightlifting, the scales tipped in an unexpected direction, resulting in a six-pound gain by summer's end. This outcome could easily have derailed my spirits, yet it served instead to fortify my resolve. The summer was not merely a time of physical exertion but a period of introspection and learning. Each drop of sweat and every moment of discipline brought me closer to understanding the complexities of personal growth. It was a summer of contrasts—of tangible achievements like the driving permit that symbolized independence and the intangible ones like the inner strength gained from facing down my failures. As I looked forward to tenth grade, I carried with me not just the anticipation of driving but the deeper lessons of perseverance and the value of setting sights beyond the immediate horizon. The summer between ninth and tenth grade taught me that life's ups and downs are often interwoven, each setback a precursor to a potential triumph, each triumph a moment to inspire further striving.

The transition from ninth to tenth grade often arrives with its own unique set of anticipations and challenges. For me, the summer before tenth grade was a rollercoaster of highs and lows, filled with expectations and worries about the upcoming school year. I was particularly excited about the prospects of coming into my own during this pivotal year, yet I harbored concerns about preparing for the State of Alabama's graduation exam, a crucial milestone in my academic journey.

As the school year commenced in September, life threw a significant curveball my way. During a leisurely weekend spent riding go-carts with my cousin, I experienced an unfortunate accident that resulted in a severe injury to my right leg; a cracked shin with a gaping hole. This incident necessitated immediate medical attention and led to my mother's deep displeasure and worry. Consequently, I found myself navigating the hallways of high school on crutches for several weeks, an ordeal that significantly hampered my mobility and independence. This period was not only physically taxing but also mentally draining, as I struggled to maintain my weight and cope with the limitations imposed by my injury.

Despite these difficulties, there was a silver lining. The accident exempted me from participating in the football season—an activity I found more stressful to endure than enjoyable. This unexpected break from sports allowed me to focus more on my academic responsibilities and reflect on my personal health and fitness goals, which had become more pressing due to the weight I had gained. The end of the first semester was a time of introspection and reevaluation of

my priorities, especially since I was looking forward to applying for my learner's permit in the upcoming semester.

As the second semester unfolded, I was filled with a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation about taking my learner's permit test. Unfortunately, the results were disheartening; I did not pass the test and my academic performance barely met the requirements for advancing to the eleventh grade. This period was marked by numerous setbacks and learning experiences, each teaching me valuable lessons about perseverance and resilience. Through these challenges, I developed a clearer understanding of my academic and personal goals, such as losing weight and successfully obtaining my learner's permit. As the school year drew to a close, I was not only recovering from my physical injuries but also preparing mentally and emotionally to tackle the obstacles of the upcoming year with renewed vigor and determination. Despite the bumps and bruises, tenth grade taught me to navigate adversity and look forward to future opportunities with optimism and resilience.

The summer preceding my junior year in high school was tumultuous, marked by personal challenges and significant life changes. I managed to pass my learner's permit exam, which was a high point, but the season was overshadowed by other, more strenuous circumstances. One of the major decisions I made was to stop playing football. Due to a lingering leg injury, I felt it provided a legitimate reason to quit—a sport I had never truly excelled in or enjoyed. This decision freed me up to concentrate on my academic goals, particularly my preparation for the Alabama State graduation test. However, this period of focus was complicated by my parents' relationship issues; they

began to drift apart, hinting at a potential divorce. As the summer drew to a close, the possibility of my family's separation loomed large, adding to the already heavy emotional burden.

During these challenging months, my weight became another growing concern. By the end of summer, I had reached 265 pounds and suspected I was nearing 270 as the new school year began. This development further complicated my efforts to maintain a positive mindset amidst the family turmoil and academic pressures. As I entered the eleventh grade, I recognized the need to stay positive and resilient, despite the scale of challenges ahead. The task at hand was daunting: to manage my health, navigate the evolving dynamics at home, and achieve academic success. With a focus on what truly mattered, I was determined to overcome these obstacles and make the most of my junior year, aiming for personal growth and stability in the face of uncertainty.

Navigating High School: Finding Balance and Beating Childhood Obesity

Entering high school marks a significant milestone in a teenager's life, but it also presents unique challenges, especially for those grappling with childhood obesity. As ninth and tenth graders embark on this journey, finding balance becomes crucial, and the opportunity to make positive changes sets the stage for a healthier future.

The Transition to High School:

For many freshmen and sophomores, the transition to high school can be both exciting and overwhelming. Amidst academic pressures, extracurricular activities, and social dynamics, maintaining a healthy

lifestyle can often take a backseat. However, this critical period offers an opportunity for adolescents to prioritize their well-being and make positive choices that can shape their future.

Addressing Childhood Obesity:

Childhood obesity remains a pressing concern, but the ninth and tenth grades present a window of opportunity for intervention and change. Studies show that during this time, a significant percentage of students demonstrate resilience and discipline in seeking out programs and initiatives aimed at promoting health and wellness.

Making Positive Changes:

Whether it's joining a sports team, participating in physical education classes, or engaging in after-school fitness programs, many students embrace opportunities to get active and make positive changes to their lifestyle. Additionally, initiatives such as healthy eating campaigns, nutritional education, and wellness workshops play a pivotal role in empowering adolescents to make informed choices about their health.

The Importance of Support:

While individual determination is key, support from parents, educators, and peers is essential in fostering a healthy environment conducive to positive change. Encouragement, guidance, and access to resources can make a significant difference in helping students overcome obstacles and stay committed to their goals.

Celebrating Success Stories:

Amidst the challenges, success stories emerge as students defy the odds and make significant strides in their journey towards health and wellness. Whether it's shedding excess weight, improving fitness levels, or adopting healthier habits, these achievements serve as inspiration for others facing similar struggles.

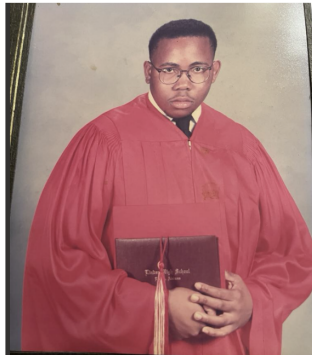
Looking Ahead:

As freshmen and sophomores navigate the ups and downs of high school life, the journey towards health and wellness is ongoing. By embracing balance, prioritizing self-care, and seeking support when needed, students can lay the foundation for a vibrant and fulfilling future.

In conclusion, entering high school marks a pivotal moment for adolescents, offering the opportunity to address childhood obesity and make positive changes that can reverberate throughout their lives. With determination, support, and a commitment to well-being, ninth and tenth graders can embark on a journey towards health, happiness, and success.

Chapter Five

Navigating and finishing Linden High School Junior & Senior Years



My junior year at Linden High School was both a monumental challenge and a period of significant personal growth.

As I entered eleventh grade, I weighed 265 pounds, but through determination and hard work, I managed to reduce my weight to 248 pounds by year's end. This year was marked not only by my battle with the scales but also by the daunting Alabama State Graduation Test, which proved to be one of my most significant academic

hurdles. The test included sections on mathematics, English, and reading. While I triumphed in mathematics on my first attempt, the English and reading sections were less forgiving. The difficulty I encountered in these areas was disheartening, but it catalyzed a pivotal transformation in my approach to my studies and personal health.

Amidst these academic challenges, my junior year was also marred by personal tragedies that brought profound sorrow and a stark reminder of life's fragility. I lost close friends and family in rapid succession: a cousin and a dear friend both named Fred, perished in a car accident, and I was still mourning the loss of another cousin, Bobby, a talented football player who died the previous year, as well as my great aunt, Georgia. Fred and Bobby were grandsons of my great-aunt Georgia. These losses were not just emotional burdens; they instilled in me a sense of urgency to seize every opportunity and live purposefully, reshaping my perspective on life and the goals, I wished to achieve.

During this tumultuous period, I faced additional challenges when my school's guidance counselor suggested that I might have a learning disability. This led to testing and the subsequent diagnosis of dyslexia, a condition I had not previously known about, which manifested in difficulties with processing written words and sentences. Discovering I had dyslexia was a turning point, as it qualified me for additional educational support that proved invaluable, such as having test questions read aloud to me. Mrs. Thomas, a teacher who became a cornerstone of my support system, was instrumental during this time. She provided not only academic help but also moral

and emotional support, helping me navigate the complexities of my educational challenges. However, this diagnosis also exposed me to ridicule and doubt from peers, which, rather than disheartening me, only fuelled my resolve to overcome their narrow perceptions and not let them define my capabilities or limit my potential.

The culmination of my junior year was a mix of setbacks and victories. On one hand, I experienced the sting of failing the English section of the graduation test again and narrowly missing the passing mark in my English class by just two points. I felt that the eleventh grade English teacher could have worked with me by giving me extra work or could have taught us instead of babysitting us. If I could've moved on, I would not have had to focus on taking English in the twelfth grade with the eleventh graders. All of my life, I always avoided getting held back, but this was a form of not being held back, a form of catching up which I had to do. So, I failed eleventh grade English by two points. Looking back over this, I had to go through this because in life you have to be held accountable for your own actions, even when other people do not have your best interest. For instance, this particular English teacher didn't have interest unless you were super smart and in advanced classes. On the other hand, I found solace and a form of escape in physical fitness, inspired by workout videos from fitness expert Tony Little. This physical transformation not only enhanced my self-esteem but also provided a healthy outlet for the stress of the ongoing challenges at home, including my parents' divorce, which deeply affected our family's dynamics and my mental state. During this time, I also lost my grandfather Elmore Robertson, the patriarch of my mom's side of the family, making it a very tough year. Despite these hurdles, I ended

the year with a renewed sense of purpose and determination, ready to face my senior year. I had learned the importance of resilience, the value of a support system, and the crucial need to continually seek resources and assistance. My journey through eleventh grade, fraught with difficulties, was ultimately enriching, laying a strong foundation for future academic pursuits and personal growth.

As I approached my senior year of high school, my focus was sharper than ever. That summer, I had successfully lost about twelve pounds for junior prom, and I continued this momentum by shedding another 10 pounds, bringing my weight down to 238 pounds. The sight of the scale not hitting 250 was exhilarating and spurred a range of ambitious plans for my final year. Among these was the bold decision to try out for the football team, despite not having played for two years. This challenge was a leap outside my comfort zone, reflecting my newfound determination and independence, further underscored by acquiring my driver's license.

As my senior year began, I was primarily focused on two significant academic goals: passing the English portion of the Alabama Graduation Test and retaking eleventh-grade English, which I had failed the previous year. Successfully navigating these challenges was crucial for me to graduate with all the necessary credits, including math and the state test. The atmosphere in the twelfth grade was tense, as I concurrently attended classes with both eleventh and twelfth graders. This situation led to some instances of bullying from younger classmates who mocked my need to repeat the English course. They didn't understand that for me, this wasn't about being held back; it was about catching up—a vital step in my educational journey. Despite

these difficulties, I managed to pass both the graduation test and the eleventh-grade English, proving to myself and others that perseverance pays off.

The suggestion that I should join Job Corps was brought up during this time, under the guise that it might help steer me away from negative influences and towards a stable career path. However, after consulting with my high school principal, I decided against it, as he advised that Job Corps was not the best environment for me at that stage. The presence of many participants with criminal backgrounds seeking rehabilitation through the program didn't align with my personal or professional aspirations. Instead, another opportunity presented itself when a military recruiter visited our school. He noted my physical condition and challenged me to lose weight, suggesting a potential career in the military, which was appealing given my brother's service and the respect I held for the institution. However, despite initially losing weight and meeting some of the physical requirements, I ultimately chose a different path. Inspired by a deep-seated desire for self-improvement and further education, I opted to attend Shelton State Community College, recognizing that this decision was better aligned with my academic goals and personal growth.

My senior year was not just about academic achievements and overcoming physical challenges; it was also a period of significant personal development. The encounter with the military recruiter had a profound impact, driving me to push my limits and reconsider what I was capable of achieving. This period reinforced the value of setting personal goals and striving towards them, regardless of the

setbacks encountered along the way. As graduation approached, I was not only prepared academically but had also gained a clearer understanding of my strengths and the direction I wanted my life to take. Choosing to pursue higher education over immediate employment or military service reflected my commitment to personal growth and my determination to succeed on my own terms. This decision, guided by thoughtful consideration and a desire to fulfill my potential, set the stage for the next chapter of my life, armed with the lessons learned and the resilience forged through my high school experiences.

As graduation night approached, the preceding week was filled with moments of reflection and celebration. One particular evening, designated as reward night, struck a deep chord within me. Standing among my peers, I couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment when I wasn't recognized for the immense effort, I had put forth throughout my high school career. I had significantly improved my grades, prepared myself for college, and even reached a physical condition where military service was a viable option. Despite these accomplishments, no accolade was forthcoming that night. The initial sting of this oversight was tempered by the anticipation of walking across the stage later in the week to receive my diploma. As I contemplated the journey, the significance of the moment wasn't lost on me. There were times when I doubted, I would reach this milestone—navigating through challenges that seemed insurmountable, from my struggles with weight and learning difficulties in an environment where conditions like dyslexia were scarcely understood.

My high school years at Linden High, especially as part of the Class of 1995, were more than just an academic passage; they were a transformative experience that shaped who I am today. Those years taught me never to give up, pushing me to overcome every obstacle life threw my way. Reflecting on this during graduation, I felt a profound sense of accomplishment. I had indeed beaten the odds—a “fat kid” from a dirt road with a learning disability, I soared far beyond the expectations placed upon me. It was not just about earning a diploma but about proving to myself and to anyone who doubted, that I could surmount any challenge.

This personal evolution was not unnoticed by those who truly knew me. Although the formal recognition might have been missing, the personal victories were no less significant. I left high school not only with academic achievements but with life lessons that prepared me for the future. As I stood on the cusp of adulthood, ready to embrace the next phase of my life, I carried with me a determination forged in the trials of my youth. This resilience, coupled with the memories of my classmates and the shared experiences that bonded us, left me grateful for every moment of my high school journey. My resolve was to continue fighting, to become a health coach who would change the lives of many other kids, drawing from my own experiences and the lessons learned. In honoring the Class of 1995 at Linden High School, I recognized not just my peers, but the collective journey that shaped us all, equipping me with the strength to face the world and make a significant impact.

Understanding Caloric Deficit: Eating fewer Calories than you Burn for Weight Loss

A caloric deficit is a crucial concept in understanding body weight management, particularly in the context of losing weight. Essentially, it refers to the state where you consume fewer calories from food and drinks than your body uses up through daily activities and bodily functions. Every action from breathing and sleeping to walking and thinking requires energy, which is measured in calories. When your body doesn't get enough calories from your diet to perform these activities, it starts to use stored energy, primarily from fat, to make up the difference. For example, if your body requires 2,000 calories per day to maintain your current weight but you only consume 1,500 calories, you are in a 500-calorie deficit. Maintaining a caloric deficit over time will lead to weight loss, as your body must extract the needed energy from its stored fat reserves. This process does not happen overnight but through consistent dietary habits and possibly increased physical activity. It's like if your body were a car: without enough fuel from food, it starts using up the reserve fuel from the gas tank (in this case, fat stores).

Now, let's break down the roles of fats, carbohydrates, and proteins in your body, which are all critical to managing your health and supporting your body's functions, especially in a caloric deficit. Carbohydrates are the body's main fuel source. They break down into glucose, which your cells use to generate the energy necessary for everything from muscle contractions during exercise to brain functions in learning. There are two types of carbohydrates: simple and complex. Simple carbohydrates are found in foods like fruits and sweets and provide quick energy. Complex carbohydrates, found in foods like whole grains and vegetables, provide more sustained energy because they take longer to digest. Balancing your intake of

carbohydrates is important; too many can lead to weight gain, while too few can result in low energy levels, particularly if you're very active.

Fats, often misunderstood and thought of as unhealthy, are actually essential to bodily functions. They provide a dense source of energy, help in absorbing vitamins, and are necessary for the growth and repair of cells. Fats also play a key role in hormone production, including hormones that regulate metabolism and immune function. There are different types of fats, with unsaturated fats (found in olive oil, nuts, and fish) being beneficial for heart health, while saturated fats (found in butter and red meat) should be consumed in moderation.

Proteins are vital for the body's structural components, such as muscles, skin, and hair, and for biochemical processes such as enzyme production and hormone synthesis. They consist of amino acids, the building blocks that your body uses to repair tissues and support immune function. Consuming adequate protein is especially important in a caloric deficit, as it helps preserve muscle mass even as you lose weight. This is crucial because muscle tissue burns more calories than fat tissue, so maintaining muscle helps keep your metabolic rate higher, making weight management easier.

Understanding how to balance these nutrients in your diet can make a caloric deficit more effective and healthier. You'll be able to lose weight while still supporting your body's growth, repair, and day-to-day functions. This balance is key not just to losing weight,

but to doing so in a way that maintains or even improves overall health.

If you have a child in elementary or middle school with a learning disability or you're concerned about their learning abilities, it's crucial to advocate for them to receive the support they need to graduate high school and pursue higher education. I'm grateful for the parents who fought for me, ensuring I didn't become a statistic of those who don't finish high school. Keep reading for more insights in the upcoming article.

The Impact of High School Diploma on College Access and Degree Attainment

Earning a high school diploma is often seen as a pivotal milestone in one's education journey, opening doors to various opportunities, including higher education. In this portion of the chapter, we examine the disparities in access to college and degree attainment between individuals with and without a high school diploma.

High School Diploma: A Gateway to Higher Education

Having a high school diploma is typically a prerequisite for admission to colleges and universities worldwide. It serves as proof of completing secondary education and demonstrates a certain level of academic achievement and competency in core subjects. With a high school diploma in hand, individuals have the opportunity to pursue further education and training at the post-secondary level.

Access to College:

1. **Admission Requirements:** Most colleges and universities require applicants to possess a high school diploma or its equivalent, such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, for admission consideration.

2. **Eligibility for Financial Aid:** Federal and state financial aid programs, as well as scholarships and grants offered by educational institutions, often require applicants to have a high school diploma or equivalent credential to qualify.

Degree Attainment:

1. **Academic Preparedness:** High school diploma holders typically enter college with a solid foundation in academic skills, including reading, writing, and mathematics, acquired through their secondary education.

2. **Career Opportunities:** A college degree significantly enhances employment prospects and earning potential. Individuals with a high school diploma alone may face limited career options and lower wages compared to those with post-secondary credentials.

No High School Diploma: Barriers to College Access and Degree Attainment

For individuals who do not possess a high school diploma, accessing higher education and earning a degree can be significantly challenging due to various barriers.

Access to College:

1. **Admission Restrictions:** Many colleges and universities have strict admission requirements that exclude individuals without a

high school diploma or equivalent credential from enrolling in degree programs.

2. **Limited Options:** Without a high school diploma, individuals may be restricted to enrolling in adult education programs or obtaining a GED as a pathway to higher education.

Degree Attainment:

1. **Academic Readiness:** Lack of a high school diploma may result in gaps in fundamental academic skills, making college-level coursework more challenging and increasing the risk of academic struggles and dropout.

2. **Financial Barriers:** Individuals without a high school diploma may face financial constraints in pursuing higher education, as they may not be eligible for certain types of financial aid or scholarships that require a high school diploma.

In conclusion, the possession of a high school diploma significantly influences access to college and degree attainment. While a high school diploma opens doors to higher education and better career prospects, individuals without one face significant barriers in pursuing further education and achieving their academic and professional goals. As such, efforts to support high school completion and provide pathways to post-secondary education for all individuals are crucial in promoting educational equity and social mobility.

Empowering High Schoolers: Battling Obesity and Embracing Wellness in the Final Years

As high schoolers approach the last two years of their academic journey, the battle against obesity and overweight becomes increas-

ingly pertinent. With college, trade school, or entering the workforce on the horizon, establishing healthy habits and a strong foundation in wellness is paramount. Fortunately, finding a comprehensive program that encompasses nutritional education, exercise routines, and a wellness mindset can make all the difference in shaping a healthier future.

The Importance of a Holistic Approach:

In the quest to combat obesity, it's crucial to recognise that a one-size-fits-all solution does not exist. Instead, high schoolers must embrace a holistic approach that addresses multiple facets of wellness simultaneously. This includes understanding the importance of nutrition, engaging in regular physical activity, and cultivating a powerful mindset that fosters resilience and determination.

Nutritional Education:

Understanding the role of nutrition in overall health is the cornerstone of any successful wellness program. High schoolers should have access to accurate and practical nutritional information that empowers them to make informed choices about their diet. Learning to decipher food labels, understanding portion sizes, and incorporating a variety of nutrient-dense foods into their meals are essential skills that will serve them well beyond high school.

Exercise Routines:

Regular physical activity is not only essential for maintaining a healthy weight but also for improving mood, reducing stress, and boosting overall well-being. High schoolers should have access to exercise programs tailored to their interests and fitness levels. Whether

it's joining a sports team, participating in group fitness classes, or simply taking regular walks, finding enjoyable ways to stay active is key to long-term success.

Wellness Mindset:

Perhaps the most critical aspect of battling obesity is cultivating a wellness mindset. This involves developing a positive relationship with food and exercise, practicing self-care, and fostering resilience in the face of challenges. High schoolers should be encouraged to set realistic goals, celebrate their successes, and seek support when needed. By prioritising mental and emotional well-being, they can build the resilience necessary to navigate life's ups and downs with grace and confidence.

Preparing for the Future:

Establishing healthy habits and a wellness mindset before entering college, trade school, or the workforce is crucial for long-term success. By laying a strong foundation in nutrition, exercise, and mindset during the final years of high school, students can enter this new chapter of their lives with confidence and vitality. Moreover, the skills and habits they develop now will serve as invaluable tools for navigating the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

In conclusion, high schoolers in the eleventh and twelfth grade have a unique opportunity to take charge of their health and wellness before embarking on the next phase of their lives. By embracing comprehensive programs that address nutritional education, exercise routines, and a wellness mindset, they can pave the way for a brighter,

healthier future. Let's empower our youth to thrive, both in high school and beyond.

Less move on to my college years where things get better and more challenging!

Linden High School

Linden, Alabama

This Certifies That

Vidal Bonta Raby

Has satisfactorily completed the Course of Study prescribed by the Alabama State Board of Education for the Accredited High Schools and by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and is therefore awarded this

Diploma

Given this month of May, nineteen hundred and ninety-five.



John F. Appleton
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

Paul Whitcomb
SUPERINTENDENT

Charles W. Raby
PRINCIPAL



Chapter Six

My Life at Shelton State Community College



As I graduated high school in 1995, the anticipation of starting my journey at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama filled me with both excitement and trepidation. During the summer, the challenging task of upgrading to a better car and securing accommodation in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, meant leaving the rural Alabama setting behind.

My first encounter with Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was during an orientation session that would unknowingly alter the course of my academic and career trajectory.

Initially, my primary aim for attending college was to acquire a skill that could ensure a stable income, influenced largely by external expectations rather than personal passion. Welding seemed a practical choice, promising immediate job prospects and good pay. It was with this mindset that I signed up for the welding program during orientation. As the session was about to conclude, Mrs. Murphy was introduced to speak about the college's Wellness Program. Her presentation was not just informative but transformative, highlighting the burgeoning field of personal training. At the time, personal trainers with certifications like ACE or ACM could earn up to \$25 an hour, a substantial rate for the mid-90s. This revelation, coupled with my own transformative experiences in personal health, sparked a new passion within me to help others achieve their wellness goals.

This newfound enthusiasm led to a significant pivot in my academic focus. Despite having already enrolled in the Welding course, I switched my major to Wellness Management just after one class. The decision faced skepticism within my household; my mother questioned the financial stability of pursuing a career in Wellness, highlighting the reliable income that a trade job could provide.

Similarly, my father was disappointed, believing that I should prioritise academic rigor over what he perceived as an uncertain career path. They both underscored the common sentiment in Alabama at the time—that Wellness was not a lucrative field. However, I was determined to forge my own path and prove my capability. As the school term began, my conviction only grew stronger. I was invigorated by the clarity of my career aspirations, all thanks to that serendipitous final talk at the orientation which introduced me to

the potential of a career in Health and Wellness. Shelton State Community College thus played a pivotal role not just in my education but in shaping my professional outlook towards embracing a field that I was truly passionate about.

Upon settling into life at Shelton State following orientation, I quickly realised that commuting from home was not an option for me. Driven by a desire for independence and the unique challenges posed by my dyslexia, I decided to move to Tuscaloosa full-time. This decision was bolstered by the resources available through an Alabama Rehabilitation Program tailored specifically to aid college students like me. The support they offered was invaluable, particularly in addressing the ways dyslexia impacted my study habits. Where most students might spend a mere twenty minutes on a subject, I found myself needing at least an hour to achieve the same comprehension. The process was slow and often frustrating, but through the program's guidance, I learned techniques that substantially improved my study efficiency and overall academic performance.

The transition to full-time residency in Tuscaloosa was made smoother thanks to a temporary job placement service called Talent Tree. They connected me with a position at JVC, a company that was willing to accommodate my college schedule. This job was a crucial step in stabilising my new life, providing not just financial support but also a valuable structure to balance school and work. It was during this period that I found roommates in a good friend, Chris, and my cousin, Red. Together, we navigated the complexities of juggling long work hours, demanding college courses, and maintaining an apartment. Our routine was exhausting, often stretching

into twelve-hour shifts at JVC, yet the experience was foundational. It taught us resilience and the importance of supporting each other through challenging times. Although the intense schedule occasionally forced me to miss classes, it reinforced my resolve to manage both work and education effectively. This experience laid the groundwork for my broader aspirations of self-employment, as I began to envision a future where I could merge my academic interests with entrepreneurial endeavors.

Juggling a twelve-hour workday alongside college classes at Shelton State was quite challenging, but having the flexibility to select my own workdays brought a sense of much-needed relief.

Aware of rumours that production at JVC typically slowed at the start of the year, and temporary workers were often the first to be laid off, I strategised to work and save as diligently as possible. This financial buffer was crucial to sustain me through potential downtimes and ensure I could cover expenses for the upcoming semester. Despite these pressures, the payoff was becoming evident academically; for the first time, I saw my GPA soar to 3.8. The improvement was a direct result of my enhanced study habits, developed through the supportive resources for dyslexia I accessed at college. Every spare moment was channeled towards maintaining this academic excellence, leaving little room for leisure.

In this new environment of independence, maintaining a balance between work, studies, and personal health became my focus. With access to the college gym, I started to gain muscle mass and leaned out, stabilizing my weight at a healthy 170 pounds. This physical

fitness regime complemented my rigorous academic schedule, helping me manage stress and maintain energy levels. During holidays like Thanksgiving, while many students returned home, I chose to stay back and work, driven by the looming threat of seasonal layoffs at JVC. This decision to sacrifice time with family was tough but necessary, reinforcing a work ethic that I've carried with me beyond college. The end of the first semester approached with a blend of satisfaction from academic achievements and the harsh reality of job insecurity as a temporary worker.

Reflecting on my choices, the initial advice from my dad to live with my aunt for added support and focus seemed more appealing as challenges mounted. Though I cherished my independence, the wisdom and support from my family, especially my aunt, continued to resonate deeply with me. Her guidance was a steady anchor in times of uncertainty. As I faced the prospect of layoffs at JVC, which eventually came to pass after the first semester, the lessons in financial prudence instilled by my parents proved invaluable. With their teachings, I had saved enough to withstand the temporary unemployment. As the second semester dawned, I was financially and mentally prepared to tackle any challenges, armed with resilience and a solid work ethic developed through a demanding but rewarding first semester of balancing work and study.

The commencement of the second semester at Shelton State Community College marked a pivotal juncture in my academic journey, filled with both anticipation and trepidation. Having successfully navigated my first semester, I was brimming with confidence, yet acutely aware of the impending challenges. This term was especially

critical as I was deeply entrenched in an intensive 18-month Wellness Management certification program. My strategy was straightforward: to intensify my efforts and succeed even with a heavier class workload.

However, just as the semester kicked off, I was blindsided by unexpected economic strains due to sweeping layoffs at JVC, which severely cut back my work hours and financial stability. This abrupt change forced me to reassess my budgeting priorities, particularly for essential expenses such as rent and car insurance. Despite these obstacles, my resolve to achieve my educational objectives never wavered. This period was characterized by a stringent budget, relying on economical food choices like Top Ramen and .99 Whoppers from Burger King, which were hardly adequate from a nutritional standpoint. Thankfully, the reduction in work hours had a silver lining, affording me more time to focus on academics and a new internship that provided practical insights into healthy eating.

During this time, the support of my longtime roommate Chris and our friends, who lived in the apartment above ours, proved invaluable. We had all been classmates since high school, and each of us held different jobs at various local restaurants. This arrangement not only helped us stay financially afloat but also ensured that we remained well-fed—a major concern for any college student. Our tight-knit community became our stronghold, enabling us to navigate the semester's challenges together. Moreover, my focus remained laser-sharp on my ultimate goal: to complete my certification and relocate to Washington State. This aspiration was not just about advancing my career but also about being closer to my brother, who

was stationed at Fort Lewis. Despite the daunting challenges, my perseverance, bolstered by the unwavering support of my friends, allowed me to overcome the hurdles of this transformative semester, thus setting the stage for future successes in health and wellness. Additionally, managing on a shoestring budget instilled in me a disciplined approach to finances, which was crucial given my reduced working hours and the need to stretch every dollar until the next payday.

My experience navigating college life at Shelton State was uniquely challenging due to my dyslexia, a condition that often-made academic endeavours more daunting than for the average student. However, the college offered a robust support system tailored specifically for students with learning disabilities, which became a cornerstone of my academic success. Through these resources, I learned invaluable study techniques and strategies to manage my dyslexia, allowing me to not just cope, but excel in my studies in ways I had previously thought unattainable. As I applied these techniques, my academic performance began to soar, culminating in a remarkable GPA of 3.8. This success did more than just boost my academic record; it significantly enhanced my confidence, fueling my resolve to pursue further opportunities in Washington state, where new prospects awaited. The journey through this challenging phase was not merely academic; it was a comprehensive test of my resilience, adaptability, and perseverance. The lessons learned extended far beyond the confines of textbooks and classrooms, encompassing real-life skills in overcoming adversity, tackling personal challenges head-on, and consistently striving for excellence against the odds. These experiences not only shaped my academic path but also prepared me for

a diverse array of future challenges and opportunities in both my personal and professional life.

In tandem with my academic pursuits, my second semester at Shelton State also brought an opportunity to intern at Gold's Gym. Initially tasked with routine duties like cleaning equipment and interacting with members, I quickly found myself engrossed in the world of fitness and personal training. Observing and learning from seasoned trainers, I was inspired by their expertise in effectively coaching others, which kindled within me an aspiration to someday own a health club. The gym's owner recognized the potential within us interns, gradually entrusting us with more significant responsibilities that provided a practical education in the fitness industry. During this period, I embraced weightlifting, which became a pivotal element of my fitness journey, transforming not only my physique—helping me achieve a robust weight of 170 pounds—but also instilling a deeper sense of discipline and dedication. This formative experience at the gym was instrumental as I navigated the concluding stages of my college years, reinforcing the values of commitment and hard work that were crucial to my academic and personal development.

As my time at Shelton State drew to a close, my professors encouraged me to consider furthering my education through additional certifications or by transferring to a larger institution. The logical progression towards certifications like ACE or ACSM seemed fitting given their relevance to my field and my recent academic achievements. Yet, as graduation approached, my focus shifted towards the immediate and exciting prospects awaiting in Washington state. The

decision to move, driven by both academic ambitions and personal factors, particularly the desire to be closer to my brother stationed at Fort Lewis, marked a significant turning point. Leaving behind the community that had nurtured my growth was bittersweet, yet it was a necessary step in the pursuit of aligning my professional goals with personal aspirations. This move was not merely a change of location but a strategic step towards new educational opportunities and personal growth, drawing on the courage and resolve honed during my transformative years at Shelton State. The enduring friendships and memories from this time, especially with my roommate Chris, continue to inspire and guide me, reminding me of the resilience and camaraderie that characterised my college experience.

Deciding to leave Alabama for Washington was a deeply emotional and challenging decision, not just because it signified a major transition, but because it was a testament to my resolve to prove myself. Despite the doubts some harbored about my capabilities, I was determined to demonstrate my independence and potential. College at Shelton State had been a pivotal phase in my life, deepening friendships from high school and forging new ones that I valued immensely. These relationships, formed in an environment that encouraged growth and learning, had become a fundamental part of my identity and my journey. The lessons learned there, from academic strategies to life management skills, were more than just educational—they were transformative, shaping my approach to life's challenges and opportunities. The supportive community and the valuable insights gained from both instructors and peers at Shelton State had equipped me with a robust toolkit for navigating the future.

Upon moving to Washington, the change was exhilarating yet filled with uncertainties. This new chapter wasn't just about academic and career development but also a profound journey of self-discovery and establishing a new life close to my brother, whose presence was a comforting reminder of home. The transition tested my adaptability and resolve, traits that had been nurtured during my college years. Despite the physical distance from Alabama, the bonds and lessons from Shelton State remained with me, continuously influencing my approach to new challenges and environments. Settling into this new phase, I realized how the educational achievements and personal connections from my college days were integral to my current journey. They didn't just enhance my resume but enriched my life profoundly, underscoring the fact that while academic pursuits can open professional doors, it's the personal growth and relationships forged along the way that truly define our paths. This bold move to Washington was more than a change of scenery; it was a step towards new opportunities that promised to broaden my horizons and enrich my life in unexpected ways.

Navigating College with Learning Disabilities: Tips for Success

Transitioning to college can be daunting for any student, especially for those with learning disabilities, as they encounter distinct obstacles. However, with the right strategies and support, students can thrive academically and socially while embracing their individuality. In this part of the chapter, we'll explore practical tips for navigating college with proper study habits while fitting into the culture of higher education.

1. Understand Your Learning Disability:

The first step in navigating college with a learning disability is to fully understand your condition. Educate yourself about your specific learning challenges and how they may impact your academic performance. This self-awareness will empower you to seek appropriate accommodations and support services.

2. Advocate for Accommodations:

Don't hesitate to advocate for the accommodations you need to succeed in college. Meet with your college's disability services office to discuss your learning disability and request accommodations such as extended time on exams, note-taking assistance, or access to assistive technology. These accommodations are designed to level the playing field and support your academic success.

3. Develop Effective Study Habits:

Developing effective study habits is essential for college success, especially for students with learning disabilities. Experiment with different study techniques to find what works best for you, whether it's breaking material into smaller chunks, using visual aids, or recording lectures for later review. Create a structured study schedule and stick to it consistently to stay organized and on track.

4. Utilize Support Resources:

Take advantage of the support resources available on campus to help you succeed academically. Seek out tutoring services, study groups, and academic coaching programs tailored to students with learning disabilities. These resources can provide valuable guidance, encouragement, and reinforcement of key concepts.

5. Embrace Your Individuality:

While navigating college with a learning disability, it's important to embrace your individuality and celebrate your unique strengths

and abilities. Don't compare yourself to others or feel pressured to conform to unrealistic standards. Instead, focus on your own journey and recognize the progress you make along the way.

6. Engage in the College Community:

Adapting to the college culture can pose challenges, particularly for students with learning disabilities who may feel different from their classmates. However, don't let your disability define you or limit your social experiences. Get involved in campus clubs, organizations, and activities that align with your interests and values. Build connections with classmates, professors, and mentors who appreciate you for who you are.

Navigating college with a learning disability requires resilience, determination, and self-advocacy. By understanding your learning disability, advocating for accommodations, developing effective study habits, utilizing support resources, embracing your individuality, and engaging in the college community, you can thrive academically and socially while pursuing your higher education goals. Remember, you are capable of achieving great success and making meaningful contributions to the college community.

Shelton State Community College

Tuscaloosa



Alabama

By the authority of the State Board of Education and on Recommendation of the Faculty hereby confers on

Vidal Bonta Raby

this Certificate in

Wellness Exercise Instructor

with all Honors, Rights, Privileges thereto pertaining.

In Witness Whereof the signatures of the duly authorized officers are hereunto affixed.

Given this thirtieth day of April, nineteen hundred and ninety-six.

Fol. Jemy
Governor and Chairman of the Board

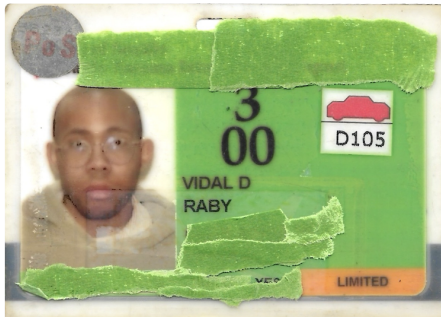
Fred Lainers
Chancellor

W. H. Houston
President of the College

W. H. Houston
Dean of Academic Services

Chapter Seven

My Time in Washington State



On May 22, 1996, at 9:22 AM, I left Birmingham, Alabama, on a crop duster plane, bound for St. Louis, then continued my journey to Sea-Tac Airport in Seattle, WA. There, my brother Levy, affectionately known as the Sarge, was waiting to welcome me to Washington state. As I settled into my new life, the initial excitement quickly confronted the harsh realities of job hunting in the health and wellness industry.

Despite my solid background in wellness management and relevant internship experiences, penetrating the competitive local gym scene as a personal trainer was tougher than expected.

Thoughts of returning to school for additional certifications such as ACE or ACSM often seemed like a viable option to enhance my qualifications and job prospects. During this challenging period, the thought of enlisting in the military also crossed my mind. However, witnessing the daily operations on the military base and confronting the uncertainty of where I might be stationed—combined with a deep-seated reluctance—confirmed that enlisting in the military was not the right path for me. Fortunately, a lucky break came when I secured a part-time, 28-hour-a-week position at World Gym. This opportunity reduced the pressure to pursue further education and lessened my considerations of a military career, allowing me to focus on training clients and adapting to the unique challenges of my new professional environment.

Despite the relief of employment, my day-to-day interactions at the gym revealed a gap between my expectations and the reality of the job. As I trained people, I often felt more like a counselor or even a babysitter than a trainer focused on physical fitness. This role made me reconsider my career path; it wasn't the passion for personal training I thought I had, but rather a deeper desire to teach and empower people to enhance their lives through better health practices and life management. This realization sparked a pivotal decision—I decided against further certifications in personal training. Instead, I resolved to explore other avenues within the health and wellness field that aligned more closely with my passion for educating and improving people's lives through comprehensive wellness strategies.

This decision was underscored by a significant life event: my departure from Birmingham, Alabama, to Washington on May 22, 1996.

It was a momentous day; I took my first solo flight, transitioning from a small city to a wider horizon. Arriving at SeaTac International Airport that afternoon, I felt a mix of excitement and surreal realisation as I embarked on this new chapter. Living with my brother Levy (the Sarge) initially provided a comforting sense of family and familiarity as I navigated my new surroundings. However, the job market's realities quickly set in, and despite my eagerness and the optimistic outset at Gold's Gym, the roles I desired were scarce, leading me to take on temporary jobs similar to those I had back in Alabama. My persistence in job applications eventually paid off with the position at World Gym, but it was the evolving understanding of my true professional desires and the direct experiences with clients that shaped my future direction in the wellness field. These experiences were not just career steps but were integral to my growth and the refining of my professional aspirations, steering me toward a path where I could truly make a difference in people's lives through health education and lifestyle coaching.

As I continued my career at World Gym in Auburn, Washington, I found myself unexpectedly transitioning from personal training into a sales role. My brief tenure as a sales manager, lasting just three weeks, was a pivotal period that unexpectedly propelled me into a new career trajectory. During this time, I was introduced to the nuances of sales, an area I hadn't explored before. However, the gym's personal training department was sold shortly after my promotion, and the new owner decided to overhaul the sales strategy, favouring experienced salespeople to lead the team. This change nudged me towards other opportunities within the network of fourteen World Gym locations across the area. It was during this transition that I met

JC, the sales manager of the World Gym in Federal Way, Washington. JC became not only a colleague but a good friend and mentor who convinced me of my potential in sales—a field I had never considered despite others often remarking on my natural ability to communicate with anyone.

Under JC'S guidance, I embraced the rigorous demands of sales where success was quantifiable and required acute discipline. The sales team was tasked with a daily goal of securing twenty appointments, expecting at least seven to show up, and hoping to convert at least three into new members. Achieving this would mean earning between \$150 to \$200 daily—an excellent income in the late 1990s. This no-salary, commission-based role sharpened my sales skills rapidly, teaching me the importance of persistence and the direct correlation between effort and reward. My time in sales also shifted my perspective towards the broader impact of my work. It was incredibly fulfilling to see individuals commit to their health, ask insightful questions, and genuinely engage in the lifestyle changes that gym memberships facilitated. The joy of helping clients was paralleled by the satisfaction of achieving high sales figures, as our team often boasted a closing rate of 77%, the highest in the company. This success did not go unnoticed, and the owner of the company decided to leverage our skills further by redistributing us to underperforming gyms to replicate our success.

The new challenges brought me to a gym in Redmond, Washington, which was significantly underperforming at the time. Over the next two years, JC and I managed to completely transform the club's fortunes, increasing its membership base to 100 new mem-

bers monthly and generating about \$80,000 in cash each month. However, as rewarding as this success was, it also sparked a desire for independence within me. Working in sales while also handling personal training duties made me realize the potential of running my own business. I started considering obtaining my ACE or ACSM certification to deepen my expertise and perhaps embark on a new journey. Just as I was about to pursue this new path, another dramatic change redirected my course—a move back to a previous location, which significantly increased my daily commute and disrupted the network and relationships I had built in Redmond. This setback was a blow not only to my professional plans but also to my personal aspirations of advancing in the fitness industry. Despite these challenges, the experiences gained from navigating the complexities of gym management and sales had already set the foundation for my future endeavors.

Relocating back to Federal Way was not just a geographical shift but a profound personal challenge, especially as my brother Levy, known as the Sarge, decided to exit the Army and move back to Alabama. Despite my efforts to persuade him to stay in Washington, and even facing requests from my mother to move back with him, I chose to remain. This decision marked a pivotal moment for me to prove to myself, and to everyone who doubted me, that I could succeed on my own. I had lived in Washington state for eight years, and for six and a half of those years, I was there without any relatives. This time was transformative, teaching me invaluable life lessons about resilience and self-reliance. It forced me to learn how to provide for myself and endure through tough times. Reflecting on my past during these challenging periods helped me to overcome

obstacles, and despite the hardships, these experiences contributed to both my personal and professional growth, ultimately making me the person I am today.

Upon planning my return to Federal Way, I was ready to tackle new professional challenges, transitioning from my previous role as an assistant manager to embrace potential opportunities. However, a sudden change orchestrated by upper management interrupted my plans, requesting that I stay in Redmond due to a managerial transition. Unfamiliar with the incoming manager and reluctant to accept this sudden shift, I opted to step back temporarily. During this period of contemplation, I received a significant offer from the vice president of the company. He proposed that I return as an assistant manager, even suggesting relocating the current assistant to make space for me. Despite the tempting nature of the offer, I found myself hesitating, unsure of my future path, particularly since my original plan was to pursue personal training certifications—a goal sidetracked by these unexpected corporate maneuvers. After careful consideration, I declined the opportunity to reclaim my previous position. Instead, I chose to return on my own terms, which allowed me to establish a more predictable and manageable Monday-to-Friday work schedule. This decision, while sacrificing potential earnings from Saturdays, was crucial in maintaining control over my career trajectory and ensuring my ongoing professional and personal development.

During this period, I began to seriously contemplate my long-term aspirations, crafting a master plan that involved relocating to the Phoenix area in Arizona, followed by a move to Charlotte, North

Carolina, two years later, which I intended to make my permanent home. Concurrently, my day-to-day experiences at the gym were enriching my understanding of gym management and sales dynamics. My weekdays were a mix of cooperation and competition, particularly with an assistant manager who considered himself a superior sale closer. Despite our competitive dynamics, we managed the gym effectively, particularly during JC's temporary absence, driving its success forward. However, over time, the repetitive nature of my duties started to take a toll on me, sparking a desire for a change from the constant pressures of the health and wellness industry. This feeling grew stronger amidst whispers about the potential sale of World Gym. Not wanting to linger in uncertainty, I decided to leave and seek new ventures, initially trying my hand in vending and later in delivery services. Despite these shifts, the allure of the gym industry continued to tug at me, underscoring the deep impact it had on my professional life.

During this transformative period in my life, I grappled with a mix of deep emotions—doubt and hope intertwined tightly as I navigated becoming a new father and dealing with the tragic loss of my cousin Clifton 3rd aka Jr. just a week before my son Donta was born. Clifton's untimely death in a gun accident left a void in my heart; he was not only a beloved relative but also a peer, born only ten months apart from me. Growing up, we were often mistaken for brothers in our early childhood but we were 1st cousins. His influence and memory have profoundly impacted my life's journey, a part of my narrative I dedicate to his memory. Despite the years that had passed since we last spoke during my college days, his sudden loss was a shocking and sorrowful moment. This poignant chapter

in my life reinforced the importance of cherishing every moment and person in our lives, driving me to pursue my dreams with even more dedication, honoring Clifton's memory through my continued efforts and successes.

Just as I was finding stability in my personal life and career, another opportunity arose, beckoning me back to the dynamic world of health and wellness. I received an offer to manage sales at a prestigious health club and convention center in downtown Seattle, renowned for their high traffic and celebrity patronage. The excitement of re-entering an environment where I had previously thrived was compelling, and I eagerly accepted the position, despite the personal challenge of having gained significant weight during my hiatus from the gym. Reuniting with Jared, it was evident that my physical appearance had changed dramatically, but this only fueled my resolve to restore my fitness level. However, my reintroduction to the bustling Seattle health scene was fraught with challenges, including swirling rumors of corporate buyouts and potential advancements for Jared to a regional role. The thrill of success was palpable, yet it was tempered by the instability of the corporate landscape. Our journey took an unexpected turn when the anticipated buyout fell through, and another gym chain took over, leaving Jared and me jobless. While JC moved on to a role at 24 Hour Fitness, I found myself at a crossroads, contemplating a return to education for a certification in personal training, pondering my next steps in a career filled with as much uncertainty as opportunity.

Facing the monotony of a long commute in my return to delivery work, I reached out to a former colleague who was now managing a

gym for Bally's. His enthusiasm for my return was encouraging, and soon I found myself immersed in a demanding yet systematic environment that prioritized strict adherence to protocols. Bally's rigorous standards and structured approach to gym management reinvigorated my professional drive. Yet, this resurgence was short-lived, as a controversial decision from regional management led to my abrupt dismissal, based on a stringent adherence to their system—a decision that blindsided me and severed my ties with the health and wellness industry I had known for years.

As I navigated through my career in the health and wellness industry, a deep introspective journey helped me clarify my true calling. Initially, I grappled with the concept of what I could offer that was unique—beyond the typical pathways of personal training or gym management. The realization dawned on me during a period of profound reflection, revisiting the foundational lessons learned from my upbringing on a dirt road in Alabama. My mother's teachings about the power of prayer and unwavering faith had always resonated with me, but they took on new significance as I pondered on my future. It was during this time that I reconnected with my spiritual roots, finding solace and direction in my faith. This spiritual renewal not only lightened my emotional burdens but also clarified my professional aspirations. I wasn't meant to be a salesman like my grandfather, whose prowess I had always admired but never emulated. Instead, my path was to educate and empower others about the importance of health and wellness, integrating life's challenges into the narrative of personal growth and resilience.

Reflecting on my experiences, I realized that communicating effectively wasn't just about talking; it was about listening—truly listening to what others need and seek in their journey toward health. This insight shaped my approach to health coaching, a field that was just burgeoning at the time. I envisioned a future where I could lead my own health club, not just as a business venture, but as a community hub where education and empowerment were at the forefront. This dream kept me motivated, constantly learning and adapting my skills to better serve others. My journey wasn't about selling a product; it was about imparting knowledge and creating an environment where others could learn to lead healthier, more fulfilled lives. This clarity of purpose guided me as I overcame various hurdles, always keeping my ultimate goal in sight: to open a health club that reflected my values and vision.

Amid these revelations and planning for the future, I re-evaluated my professional trajectory. The idea of further education, which had once seemed daunting, now appeared as a necessary step to enhance my credibility and expertise in the field. This phase of my life was marked by a temporary career pause, where I worked as a Vending Machine Operator. This role, while less demanding, provided me the space to think deeply about my next moves. It was during this reflective period that an opportunity unexpectedly presented itself through JC, a friend managing a health club in Eastern Washington. He invited me to take a managerial role in a new club he was overseeing. Despite the challenges it presented, including relocating to a community with very different dynamics from what I was accustomed to, the role was a perfect fit for my aspirations. Reconnecting with JC and moving to Liberty Lake, Washington, reignited my

professional drive. Together, we began to implement strategies that significantly increased the club's revenue and impact, proving that the right opportunities come when one is truly aligned with their personal and professional philosophy.

However, our success was soon overshadowed by a downturn. A single bad month, which is not uncommon in business, prompted the club's owner to make abrupt managerial changes. JC was re-assigned to a struggling club in Moses Lake, while I was asked to stay and permanently move to Liberty Lake. This request came at a time when my personal life was growing more complex—I had a son under two years old to consider, and the stability of our family life was paramount. The owner, who had previously enticed us with promises of equity and investments in our development—including funding for my certification and a stake in the training department—failed to deliver. Faced with broken promises for the third time and prioritizing my son's well-being, I decided to return to Tacoma. After a brief stint back in Tacoma, another call from JC signaled yet another twist. He had left the health club and started his own venture, inviting me to join him. The timing, however, clashed with my personal responsibilities, particularly a custody battle for my son, which ultimately necessitated a much more significant decision about my future.

Choosing between a promising professional opportunity and my family responsibilities led to one of the toughest decisions of my life. Despite the potential of a fresh start with JC'S new health club and the allure of potentially lucrative prospects, my priority was my son's stability and welfare. The ongoing custody battle was not

only a significant emotional strain but also required my presence and focus. Thus, despite the hard choices and the potential sacrifices involved, I decided to move back to Alabama. This move was not just a physical relocation but a strategic retreat from the professional path I had been pursuing, aimed at refocusing on what mattered most—family. This decision underscored a pivotal shift in my life’s trajectory, reaffirming my commitment to forward-looking choices that align with my deepest values and responsibilities.

In September 2003, my life took a tumultuous turn as I faced a custody battle for my son, compelling me to leave Washington State and return to Alabama. This decision wasn’t easy; it felt like a step backward, relinquishing all that I had worked hard to achieve and the personal growth I had experienced. Living in Washington taught me how to be self-sufficient and navigate adulthood but returning to Alabama felt like regressing to my younger self, a regression I was reluctant to embrace. Despite the emotional turmoil, I committed to confronting this challenge head-on, much like a buffalo running toward a storm rather than away from it. I had hoped to return to Washington within six months, a promise I shared with friends. As time passed, from months to a year, I never returned. Throughout those years, I experienced significant ups and downs; I left as a boy and returned as a man ready to confront any obstacles ahead.

As I prepared to leave Washington State, a sense of failure loomed over me. My original plan had been to move to Arizona in 2003, live there for three years, and then relocate permanently to Charlotte, North Carolina by 2006. These moves were more than mere changes of scenery; they represented ambitious personal goals and a vision for

my future that few others believed in or even knew about. Arizona was to be a steppingstone, and Charlotte was the ultimate goal—a place I had chosen to anchor my aspirations and dreams. Even now, the desire to settle in Charlotte still burns within me, a reminder of my unfulfilled plans and the audacity of my younger ambitions.

The drive back to Alabama with my brother Levy (the Sarge), who had helped me move to Washington State nearly a decade earlier, brought my journey full circle. Those seven and a half years away were transformative, a crucible of self-discovery and independence that turned a boy into a man. This evolution was steeped in trials and lessons that instilled in me resilience and self-reliance. While moving back might have seemed like a regression, it was, in fact, a strategic retreat to regroup and face my responsibilities from a position of strength. This return was not just a geographical shift but a pivotal moment in my life's narrative, signaling a new chapter where past setbacks would inform future triumphs in new landscapes.

Reflecting on Washington State evokes a deep sense of nostalgia, especially considering it has been 22 years since I last lived there. Washington continues to hold a special place in my heart, as it's where I made the leap from youth to adulthood and forged lasting memories. As I reflect on this significant chapter of my life, I feel compelled to express my gratitude to several key individuals who made a profound impact on my journey. My heartfelt thanks go to JC, Jeff, Henry, Harrison, and Steve. Most importantly, I want to acknowledge my goddaughters and godson, who hold a special place in my heart. If there are any names I've missed, please know

my gratitude extends to all those with whom I formed and nurtured relationships during my time in Washington State.



Levy Lawson "The Sarge."

Chapter Eight

Return to Alabama



Returning to Alabama felt like a regression. Traveling along the familiar dirt roads, I found myself back where everything started, not just for a visit but because I had returned. That first night, as I lay in my old room, a barrage of thoughts stormed through my mind. By the end of the first week, the realization had fully sunk in, and I instinctively withdrew from others, not wanting to admit, even to myself, that I felt like a failure. This sense of defeat was a heavy cloak I wore, much like the struggles of my youth in Alabama, a chapter I thought I had closed. A month into my return, conversations with my mother brought some solace. She infused our talks with biblical wisdom, emphasizing the importance of church and tithing—practices I had neglected during my time in Washington

State. Heeding her advice, I started attending church again. Slowly, things began to look up, but the progress wasn't as swift or as fulfilling as I had hoped. My heart was still tethered to Washington State, the place I had called home for nearly eight years. I didn't want people to know I had returned to Alabama; I couldn't bear the thought of their pity, or worse, their smug comments like, "I knew he was going to fail," or "I knew he'd come back." These words echoed in my head, fuelling my resolve to prove them wrong. Amid these pressures, I found myself sinking into sorrow, wrestling alone with my silent battles.

This period of reintegration into Alabama life was compounded by practical and emotional battles. The job market was unforgiving. The available jobs paid only minimum wage, a stark \$6.50 per hour, a reminder of how much my financial situation had deteriorated since the late 1990s. It was a humbling experience, scrambling to make ends meet on wages I hadn't seen in over a decade. During this time, I also found myself embroiled in a tough custody battle for my son, Donta, a challenge many men face and often lose. Despite the bleak job prospects and the emotional turmoil of the legal fight, this period was marked by a significant personal victory. After two and a half years of struggle, thanks to my renewed commitment to my faith and the unyielding support of my family, I won the custody battle. This victory, though deeply significant, was a solitary beacon in the ongoing struggle to secure stable employment and a promising future for both me and my son. The weight of these challenges was immense, but they were crucial in redefining my resilience and faith, shaping the path forward in the face of adversity.

During a time already laden with personal and professional challenges, I faced an even greater ordeal as my grandfather, Clifton Raby, battled pancreatic cancer. His frequent hospitalizations deeply affected me; he was not only my father's dad but also a vital figure in my life, known for his resilience and go-getter attitude. I often reflected on his influence during my time in Washington State, where he was a frequent anecdote in my sales meetings at the health club. I bragged about his unmatched sales skills, his ability to engage with anyone—an ability I aspired to emulate. Despite being naturally reserved, a shy fat kid from a dirt road, I learned to converse freely, a skill I attributed to my grandfather's example and my own faith-driven confidence. But as his health deteriorated, it was like reliving a painful part of my past. When my grandfather on my mother's side, Elmore Robertson, passed away during high school, it was a difficult time, and now, unfortunately, history was repeating itself with my grandfather, Clifton Raby, on my father's side. His hardworking nature often attracted detractors who resented his success and autonomy in maintaining a business alongside his job. I recall a significant moment when, following a late haircut with my son Donta, a woman made a disrespectful remark about my grandfather, Clifton Raby. I was so aggrieved that I had to step outside the barbershop, struggling to cope with the notion that he was fighting for his life.

Amid this sorrow and reflection, the lure of Washington State grew stronger, especially when an old friend, JC, called to offer me a job at his newly established health club. This opportunity seemed like destiny, echoing our long-held discussions about starting our own ventures. The call came as a beacon of hope, a chance to return to a place that felt more like home, away from the bitterness

and grief festering in Alabama. Despite my excitement, I was torn by the emotional weight of my grandfather's impending funeral. I grappled with feelings of failure and displacement, questioning my life's direction. It was clear that Alabama, for all its familial ties, was not where I belonged. My aspirations leaned increasingly towards independence and entrepreneurship—a vision yet unclear in form but resolute in spirit. This period marked a profound turning point, nudging me towards a path aligned with my deepest ambitions, away from the sawmill's drudgery and towards a future I was determined to craft on my own terms. Leaving my job at a local furniture store for the sawmill had been a tough decision, driven by necessity rather than desire. Yet, even there, amidst the daily grind, a conversation with a colleague catalyzed my resolve to pursue a career that matched my passion for health and wellness. He noticed the incongruity between my job and my aspirations, urging me to seek something more fulfilling. This advice propelled me to consult a staffing agency in Tuscaloosa, setting in motion a series of events that would eventually redefine my life's trajectory.

After attending an interview at a temporary agency named Kelly, a week passed before I received promising news about a potential job, which was termed a "permanent" position. This situation eerily mirrored my college days; the same aunt who had offered me a place during my studies extended the same kindness again. However, just as I was preparing to move and join her, tragedy struck with her sudden passing. This loss, compounded by the grief of losing my grandfather less than a year earlier, delivered a profound blow to our family. Dealing with the death of two pivotal figures in such a short span was an immense challenge. It was during this period

of deep sorrow that I gathered the strength to move to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Leaving behind the dirt road of my youth—a path that shaped approximately 80% of who I am today, influencing how I interact with people and most importantly, shaping my faith and devotion to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—was a testament to my resolve to move forward and redefine my life’s trajectory amidst adversity.

The staffing agency, though modest in appearance, became a crucial bridge to new beginnings. They connected me with a job at Recticel, a significant upgrade from the sawmill, marking a pivotal shift toward a more stable and rewarding career. This opportunity came at a time when an old friend from Washington state reached out with an attractive offer to return and collaborate on a new venture, which promised a better salary and improved living conditions. However, feeling a renewed sense of purpose and stability, I chose to remain in Alabama, determined to build my future there. This decision was instrumental in setting me on a path that not only provided immediate financial relief but also offered a platform for long-term professional growth. From these experiences, I gained an understanding of the significance of resilience and hope, as well as the value of accepting change, even in challenging circumstances. This journey from financial and emotional hardship to achieving stability underscores the profound impact of perseverance and the critical role of making strategic choices in shaping one’s destiny.

During this period, both my professional and personal lives underwent significant transformations. I had landed a new job with a \$3 hourly pay increase, but despite this, I felt unfulfilled. Deep down,

I knew I was destined to run my own business. My entrepreneurial journey began with V Access, a venture where I sold car stereos, radios, TVs, and rims. This experience provided a valuable introduction to running a business, although I soon realized that my interest in car accessories was a hobby rather than a passion. Meanwhile, I was gradually rediscovering my love for the gym, which contrasted with my waning interest in my business.

In pursuit of a fresh start and closer familial ties, I relocated to Tuscaloosa. Staying initially with my cousin and uncle—my late aunt’s son and husband—not only offered stability but also allowed me to contribute significantly to my young cousin’s upbringing. This move proved crucial as I transitioned out of V Access. While the business was successful, it wasn’t the right fit for me. As you continue through this book, remember this initial venture, as it sets the stage for the developments that shape who I am today.

The relocation to Tuscaloosa was a pivotal yet challenging move, driven by my desire to be closer to my son, Donta. Despite getting accustomed to the long drives, commuting over an hour each way became unsustainable. This change not only brought me within an hour’s distance from Donta, enhancing our time together, but it also introduced a demanding new job that mirrored the rigorous pace of my college days at JVC. The position demanded 12-hour shifts, yet it offered fresh perspectives and opportunities that were instrumental in shaping my resilience and character. Building friendships with colleagues like Calvin proved essential during this adjustment period, as did the support from my cousin and uncle who helped me acclimate to the new environment. Additionally, knowing that my

son was well cared for by my mother and sister back home allowed me to focus on my career and personal growth without worry. This balance of professional demands and familial support strengthened me, reinforcing my commitment to stand up for what was right for my son and myself. It instilled a sense of gratitude and resilience, acknowledging the vital role that these relationships and new beginnings played in making me the man I am today.

Over time, as I continued to meet more colleagues at work, I found a good friend in EJ, and together we shared a routine that extended beyond the workplace to the gym. It became like clockwork for us—daily workouts at World Gym, which had previously been Gold Gym. The name change did little to alter the nostalgia that the place evoked for me, evoking nostalgic recollections of past days where I pushed myself to the limit there. During one of these workout sessions, I met Terrellis, another gym enthusiast who was intensely dedicated to his fitness regime. Terrellis and I quickly developed a strong camaraderie, and as I was moving out of my aunt's house in pursuit of more independence, and he became my roommate. This friendship not only endured but became one of the most significant ones in my life, bolstered by our mutual dedication to maintaining fitness.

As EJ, Terrellis, and I spent more time together, our bonds strengthened, particularly during the grueling 12-hour shifts we often worked. Even when our work schedule became almost unmanageable, with seven-day workweeks, we managed to carve out time for the gym, maintaining our commitment to fitness and each other's company. It was during this period that another colleague, Scott,

joined us at the plant, and he quickly became part of our close-knit circle. One day, EJ, ever the connector, introduced me to his cousin from Boston, Massachusetts. He jokingly predicted that she and I would end up married—a prediction that seemed far-fetched at the time but would later prove prescient as our relationship developed. Reflecting on those years, I realized that maintaining a consistent workout routine was not just about physical health but also about managing life's stresses and maintaining personal relationships. This philosophy of consistency and balance has shaped my approach to life, affirming my belief that no matter where I work—whether for a company or myself—making time for physical exercise is essential for adding value to my life.

As my friendship with EJ deepened at work, he arranged for me to meet his cousin, sweet Regina. However, I had already planned to spend the weekend with my son, Donta, which made me assume the opportunity to meet her was missed. But life had other plans. Returning to work that Monday, EJ, who always had a knack for spontaneity, asked me to pick him up for our usual gym session. Post-workout, instead of our regular routine, he insisted on grabbing some protein and quickly detoured to his brother's place where a barbecue had been held the day before. To my surprise, there stood Regina, playfully chiding me for not attending the barbecue to meet her. Even though she declined to share her phone number with me at first, she opted to take mine instead and assured me she would call. True to her word, Regina called the following week, sparking conversations that stretched for hours, discussing life and her plans in Boston versus life in the South. It took a while, but after three weeks,

I finally got her number, and our relationship began to take a serious turn.

Over the course of 2005, Regina and I began to date long-distance. She visited Alabama in September, then we met in Atlanta in October, and again in November for Thanksgiving. Despite her declaration that she wouldn't return for Christmas, she visited once more before I made my first trip to Massachusetts in February 2006. Regina had planned an extensive trip for us, including a visit to an outlet mall and a trip to New York City, which was an exhilarating first for me. Amid these travels and our growing connection, I knew I wanted to propose. By the end of 2006, although I had just secured a permanent position and was working on my finances, I planned to propose in 2007, feeling more settled and optimistic about our future.

In 2007, our bond continued to grow stronger, fortified by regular visits that ensured we never spent more than two months apart. During one such visit, despite dealing with an unexpected bout of Bell's palsy, I proposed to Regina. Her support throughout my recovery underscored the strength of our relationship, leading us to set a wedding date for August 30, 2008.

In February 2008, my grandmother, Rosie Robertson my mother's mother, passed away. It was a sad time. Regina, though only my fiancée at the time, came down to Alabama to be by my side.

Regina's impact went beyond offering personal support; she consistently motivated me to progress in my professional endeavours.

She encouraged me to acquire new computer skills and to consider further certifications that could propel my career forward. This guidance was crucial, prompting not just maintenance, but enhancement of my career prospects. Her belief in me transformed my approach to personal and professional growth, instilling a sense of ambition and resilience that was instrumental in navigating the challenges we faced together. Her support and belief in my capabilities were transformative, pushing me to expand my skills and embrace opportunities that would later prove fundamental in our journey together.

As our relationship deepened, I began to see the profound impact of having a supportive partner. Regina, even as my girlfriend, exemplified true love and steadfast loyalty, qualities that compelled me to make her my fiancée, or as I fondly referred to her back then, my future wife. She was well aware of my passion for fitness and knew how much I wanted to enhance my qualifications. Regina even took the initiative to pull up information on ACE certification for personal training, but despite her encouragement, my confidence to return to school was lacking. I continually deferred, focusing instead on our upcoming marriage. Regina challenged my excuses, asserting that fear should not hold me back. Meanwhile, my job at Recticel North America began to wane, with hours being cut back significantly. This reduction mirrored the economic constraints I faced throughout my upbringing and early adult years in Alabama, leading me to confront the grim reality of insufficient work hours. Determined to improve my situation, I applied for an account manager position at Coca-Cola. Although my initial interview did not secure the job, and they offered me a less desirable merchandising role which I declined due to insufficient pay, persistence paid off. About two weeks later, I

received a call back; they were impressed with my interview and asked for patience. Eventually, I was hired as an account manager.

As our wedding approached, I took a part-time job to save for our honeymoon and considered more significant career moves. Despite a job offer from Coca-Cola that initially didn't meet my expectations, persistence led to a promising offer in sales, which aligned better with my career goals. This period was a whirlwind of planning and preparation, not only for our wedding but for a life together. Although our first year of marriage was still long-distance, with Regina in Boston and me contemplating a move to Charlotte, North Carolina—a place I had always wanted to be—we made it work. Our commitment to never go more than 30 days without seeing each other kept our bond strong and our spirits high, underscoring the power of love and perseverance in our journey together.

As our wedding day approached, the reality of it all felt surreal. I reflected on my past, thinking back to my upbringing in Alabama where many doubted my prospects, asserting I wouldn't achieve much, least of all a happy marriage. Yet, here I was, about to prove them wrong, deeply grounded in the belief that God has a purpose and a plan for each of us—a plan for prosperity and not harm. The rehearsal dinner on August 29th was particularly memorable, not just for the event itself, but for the emotional release it facilitated. I was able to express all my pent-up emotions—joy, fulfillment, and gratitude. I felt immensely blessed, and I took the opportunity to give thanks to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I also remembered my mother, who is now in heaven, and expressed my ongoing appreciation for my sister, who was instrumental in helping me raise

my son, Donta. This journey to marriage highlighted concerns about blending our family, but it also strengthened my resolve to make it a success, fueled by the support and love from those closest to me.

On the day of our wedding, I walked down the aisle in the best shape of my life, weighing 170 pounds with about 13% body fat. Feeling physically strong and confident, I was in great shape, and it added to the joy and significance of the day. During this time, I balanced wedding preparations with a part-time job as a delivery driver to save for our honeymoon, while also considering significant career moves, including my role as an account manager at Coca-Cola. Despite the geographic distance in our first year of marriage—with Regina living in Boston and me planning a move to Charlotte, North Carolina—we committed to seeing each other every 30 days, maintaining a strong connection. This commitment underscored the resilience and dedication in our relationship. Our wedding on August 30th was a splendid affair attended by both our families, perfectly orchestrated despite the distance, with Regina planning from Massachusetts and the event held in Alabama. We celebrated our union and then ventured to Jamaica for a honeymoon that was the beautiful climax of our months of planning. After the honeymoon, the stark reality of logistics and long-distance coordination awaited as Regina returned to Boston and I stayed behind to finalize our plans for a future together, all while maintaining the fitness level I had achieved just before our wedding, marking the start of our new life together with optimism and shared goals.

As a newly married man, the first year of marriage proved exceptionally challenging, not just due to the usual trials but because of

our geographical separation. I was in Alabama, and Regina was in Massachusetts. I harbored plans to relocate to Charlotte, North Carolina, believing that a fresh start there could unify us. However, these plans remained just that—plans—without concrete actions to realize them. The distance magnified every minor disagreement, turning phone calls into arenas of conflict whenever we were apart. This strain was exacerbated during visits from family and friends, who often questioned when we would finally live together. My mother and others kept asking, “When are you going to join your wife?” or “When will she move here?” Despite the pressures, the thought of moving to Massachusetts was unappealing to me, and I hoped for a solution that would not require such a drastic step.

The answer came unexpectedly as we approached our first anniversary on August 30, not long after an encouraging conversation with the plant manager at Coca-Cola, where I worked. This discussion happened around the Fourth of July, a time when I was reflecting deeply on our marriage and the distance between us. He offered me an opportunity that seemed like divine intervention, proposing extra paid time off if I could work on the holiday. This would allow me the chance to visit Regina and also explore job opportunities in Massachusetts, facilitating our eventual reunion. Energized by this possibility, I scoured Coca-Cola’s job listings that very night and, fortuitously, found a position that seemed perfect. I informed him about the job, leading to a phone interview. Since digital platforms like Skype or Zoom were not yet in use in 2009, he advised me to keep a photo of Regina and our son Donta nearby during the call to remind me of why I was striving for this change. This strategy

grounded me during the interview, and I was soon invited for a second round, which eventually led to a job offer.

With my apartment lease in Alabama nearing its end and the impending move to Massachusetts, renewing the lease seemed impractical. Thankfully, my good friend Scott, whose wife also shared the name Regina, offered me a temporary place to stay. This gesture greatly eased the stress of transitioning. I secured the job in Massachusetts and prepared for the move, reflecting on how this shift mirrored the life-changing decision I made in 1996 when I first moved to Washington. As I packed, I contemplated the significant changes ahead—this time, the stakes were higher as I was not only moving but also building a new life in a new state, all while aiming to provide a unified home for Regina and our son. The timing of everything, aligning with our wedding anniversary, seemed almost predestined, reaffirming my belief in the purposeful trajectory of our lives together.

As the time drew near for me to leave Alabama, I was overwhelmed with a mixture of emotions. The excitement of a new beginning was tinged with sadness and anxiety, creating a chill that still resonates with me today. This departure was unlike any other; it was not just a physical move but a significant life transition. The plan was to celebrate our first anniversary in Jamaica, where I would meet Regina who would be flying in for the occasion. As I packed up my belongings and said farewell to friends, I also made a poignant trip down to the country to visit my mother, family, and see my son, Donta, one last time before leaving. Knowing that Donta wouldn't be joining me immediately but would follow the next year added

to the complexity of my emotions. That weekend flew by quickly, and by Monday morning, I was loading my Yukon, setting off from the familiar dirt road, filled with determination. As I drove towards Atlanta to catch my flight to Jamaica, my mind was focused solely on not failing this time. This journey wasn't just a move; it was a way for me to demonstrate to myself and my son that with growth and resilience, success is achievable.

The drive from Atlanta to Boston was a period of deep reflection and anticipation. Leaving behind Alabama, where Donta would continue his schooling, was one of the hardest decisions I had made. It was heart-wrenching to part ways, even if it was just for a short while, as I aimed to lay down the groundwork for a better future in Massachusetts. Arriving in Massachusetts marked a pivotal turning point in my life, demanding a high level of resilience and adaptability. The support from Regina, coupled with the encouragement from friends and family, bolstered my confidence to tackle the new challenges that awaited me. This move was more than a change of scenery; it was about seizing opportunities that promised to profoundly shape our future. Each mile away from Alabama symbolized a step closer to new beginnings, reinforcing my commitment to make this transition successful. The promise to return for Donta's birthday in December was a comforting thought that helped temper the pain of separation, reminding me of the purpose behind these sacrifices. As I navigated the complexities of establishing a new life in a new state, I was continually driven by the vision of providing a better life for myself and my family.

I will always keep God first no matter; since He's My Provider.

Here are two verses from the Bible that talks about leaving and coming back home:

Genesis 12:1 (NIV) - *“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.’”*

This verse speaks of God calling Abram to leave his home and go to a place that God would later reveal to him, which marks the beginning of Abram’s journey and the formation of a new covenant people.

Chapter Nine

Adjustments and Challenges in Boston



Leaving Georgia to embark on a new chapter in Massachusetts right after celebrating our vacation and first anniversary was a journey filled with a whirlwind of emotions—sadness mingled with happiness. This trip was particularly poignant as it symbolized a fresh start with my wife by my side, eager for the new adventures awaiting

us in Massachusetts. However, amidst the excitement, two thoughts persistently occupied my mind.

The first and most pressing concern was how this move would impact my son, Donta. The thought of him adjusting to life without my daily presence was distressing. My second thought was driven by a longstanding personal desire. Having moved before, I harboured a strong inclination towards relocating to Charlotte, North Carolina, believing it to be our next home. This preference was based on my past experiences and a deep-seated hope that Charlotte would be our future.

However, as we often find in life, my plans were not aligned with the unfolding reality. God had other plans for us. The decision to leave Alabama for Boston marked a profound change, filled with the promise and challenges of starting anew. The complexity of my emotions as I prepared to leave was overshadowed by the opportunity to advance my career and offer a better life for my family.

On September 3, 2009, with my belongings securely packed, my wife Regina and I began our drive towards Massachusetts. It was not just a move, but a step towards hoping for enriched opportunities and significant personal growth in an environment starkly different from the warm, familiar landscapes of Alabama. This journey was not merely about relocation but about transforming our lives and aspirations.

Upon arriving in Boston, I was immediately thrust into a new role at Coca-Cola, a promotion that marked a significant upturn in

my career yet brought its own set of challenges. Unlike the more relaxed atmosphere of Alabama, the business environment in Boston was intense and competitive, particularly as I was entering a market dominated by Pepsi. This new role required me to quickly adapt to the fast-paced lifestyle and to establish connections with store owners and managers who were skeptical about the turnover of account managers and hesitant to embrace change. Despite these challenges, I remained committed to maintaining my health and wellness, joining a local gym immediately to keep my physical and mental health in check. The flexibility in my work schedule helped ease some of the initial burdens, allowing me some breathing room to adjust to this new chapter in my life.

In addition to the new chapter, we were embarking on in Boston, I was fortunate to have the unwavering support of my in-laws, Johnnie Mae and James Otis Sanders, who are truly the epitome of warmth and kindness. They welcomed me with open arms, treating me as if I were their own son from the very beginning. Their constant support and generosity have been a bedrock in my life, and for this, I am endlessly grateful. Their ongoing care and concern continue to be a source of strength and gratitude in my life.

However, as the initial excitement of our move to Boston waned over time, the stark differences between my new environment and the familiarity of the South began to make themselves felt more acutely. The cultural contrasts were particularly striking, marked by a cooler demeanor in social interactions compared to the warm congeniality I was accustomed to. This shift was challenging to navigate, especially during the crucial first year of marriage when bonds

are often tested and strengthened. Feeling somewhat out of place, I found myself frequently contemplating a move to Charlotte, North Carolina. I believed Charlotte would offer better opportunities for us—a sentiment that grew stronger as my discomfort in Boston persisted. This idea was my own; I felt that Charlotte’s environment and prospects aligned more closely with my aspirations and would facilitate a smoother transition than Boston had.

Amidst these challenges, the discovery of Jubilee Christian Church became a turning point. The community there, led by our insightful Bishop Thompson, offered words of wisdom and solace that deeply resonated with us. This spiritual sanctuary became our refuge, helping us to navigate the complexities of life in a new city. The support from the church, as well as that of my wife and the friendships we nurtured, started to ease my concerns. This burgeoning network of relationships and the spiritual nourishment we found helped to slowly reshape my perspective.

As I gradually adjusted, the combined influence of familial support, spiritual belonging, and new friendships fostered a renewed sense of optimism. Despite the initial hurdles, the potential for growth and new opportunities in Boston began to reveal themselves, suggesting that perhaps we could find our place in this vibrant city after all. This experience taught us the power of resilience and the importance of seeking out community, wherever we might find ourselves.

During the first year of our life in Massachusetts, the adjustment phase was notably challenging. My thoughts frequently turned to-

wards my son, Donta, and the yearning to have him with us so that we could truly be together as a family. This emotional tug made me feel even more strongly that relocating from Boston to Charlotte would facilitate an easier transition for all of us. There was something about Charlotte, North Carolina, that had captured my heart since 2001, making the idea of living there incredibly appealing to me.

However, convincing my wife Regina to make this move was not straightforward. The prospect of uprooting again so soon after settling in Massachusetts required careful consideration and was met with understandable hesitation. As the first year in Massachusetts drew to a close, my desire to move to Charlotte only intensified, becoming a beacon of hope as I longed to leave Massachusetts behind.

Originally, I had hoped to make the move to Charlotte after just one year, but various circumstances delayed our plans. It was eventually agreed that we would revisit the possibility of moving after spending two more years in Massachusetts. This delay was a significant emotional setback for me, and maintaining a positive outlook became increasingly difficult as I grappled with the prospect of another year in a place that had yet to feel like home.

The second year in Massachusetts was a rollercoaster of emotional highs and lows. I managed to maintain my physical health through a consistent fitness regime, which provided some relief from the stress. However, the constant high stress levels, coupled with the daunting challenge of establishing ourselves sufficiently to consider buying a home in the expensive Massachusetts market, weighed heavily on

me. Moreover, the ongoing separation from Donta, who was still in Alabama, added a deeply personal strain to my daily life.

This period of my life was marked by a mix of resilience and longing—a resilience to keep pushing forward in Massachusetts and a longing for the life I envisioned for us in Charlotte. The idea of finally moving there represented not just a change of scenery but a hopeful step towards a better aligned future for our family.

In 2010, my encounter with my Senior Pastor Matthew K. Thompson, affectionately known as PMKT, marked a turning point. His guidance and the vision that he painted of a possible life in the Massachusetts suburbs, which could be like a life in Charlotte, provided a fresh perspective, offering a glimmer of hope amidst my dissatisfaction with my current situation. PMKT's enthusiastic depiction of what life could look like outside of Massachusetts inspired me, yet the reality of my circumstances continued to anchor me to a place I had grown to resent. Despite his encouraging words, the idea of settling down in Massachusetts remained unappealing, and I kept my sights set on relocating to Charlotte, where I longed to live since 2000, where I could finally start anew with my family.

However, the journey toward this dream was fraught with challenges. Throughout 2011, as I tried to secure employment in Charlotte, each attempt ended in frustration. The elusive job opportunity in North Carolina seemed just out of reach, and I grappled with the decision of whether to continue pursuing this dream or resign myself to staying in Massachusetts. The year 2012 brought a glimmer of hope when my wife Regina and I traveled to Charlotte to explore

our options. We investigated apartments, houses, schools, and neighborhoods, fully intending to move. Despite our preparations and excitement, a series of setbacks—including an unexpected emergency landing during our flight and my subsequent transfer to a different Coca-Cola plant due to a facility closure—complicated our plans. These challenges not only delayed our move but also heightened the stress and tension between Regina and I as we navigated our next steps.

As the year 2013 rolled in, I found myself at a spiritual and personal crossroads. It was time to genuinely commit to the path God had laid out for me, despite my long-held dreams of living in Charlotte, North Carolina. Since 2001, I had harbored the hope of moving there, believing it held a special purpose for my life and future. But as my wife Regina and I delved deeper into prayer and reflection, it became clear that our immediate journey was to remain in Massachusetts. We decided to put our faith fully in God's plan, focusing on establishing our lives there and seeking out a new home that would meet our family's needs.

Our quest for a home in Massachusetts was a test of faith and patience. Regina and I made a detailed list of everything we desired in a home, including a four-car garage and a bright, airy living room. We prayed over this list, entrusting our dreams to God. The search led us to an open house that seemed promising. However, when we arrived in our beat-up Honda Accord, the realtor's skepticism about our financial capability was palpable. Undeterred, we made an offer, only to face rejection. This setback left me disheartened, and doubts

began to creep in, echoing my earlier conviction that we should have moved to Charlotte.

During this challenging time, support came from an unexpected conversation with my Senior Pastor Matthew K. Thompson, affectionately known as PMKT. On a particularly tough day, after a routine job visit, he called me. His words of confidence and advice uplifted me, even as I struggled with frustration over the housing situation. He seemed to possess a divine insight, a closeness to God that I envied. Despite my updates about the house being off the market, his optimism was unwavering. Shortly after, Regina urged me to check once more with the realtor about the house. I was skeptical, believing it to be futile since the house was no longer available. But when I contacted the realtor, she surprised me by mentioning another property she wanted to show us, though it faced two graveyards—an unlikely sell for Regina.

This period of searching and spiritual seeking culminated in a profound moment shortly before my birthday. After a discussion with Regina about potential birthday plans, God spoke to me with clarity and purpose; He instructed me to go and pray over our initial house choice—the one we thought was lost to us. Despite the realtor's firm statement that the house was off the market, I trusted in the divine directive. Regina and I prayed over the house that very night. The following day, after a church event focused on wealth building and economic issues, our realtor called in the afternoon, just as we arrived home from the economic event at our church, with unexpected news: the original house was back on the market due to the buyer backing out.

Elated, we quickly put in the same offer we had initially made, and by Monday, our offer was accepted. Regina and I were overwhelmed with gratitude, praising God for His guidance and timing. This experience reinforced a powerful lesson: our plans are not always God's plans, and his plans have a way of unfolding that can lead to unexpected prosperity and joy.

The climax of this tumultuous period came later in 2013, a year marked by personal trials and deep reflection. In April, my mother Minnie suffered a severe stroke, a devastating blow that required me to travel frequently between Massachusetts and Alabama. My employer, Coca-Cola, along with my church and Senior Pastor, PMKT, provided incredible support during this difficult time. We managed to move forward with the home purchase in May, a bittersweet milestone overshadowed by my mother's health crisis. The loss of my mother in October of that year left a profound void, filled with grief but also with a commitment to persevere. Throughout this period, the support of my prayer partner Keith and my friend Anthony in Boston was crucial. Despite my yearnings for Charlotte, I chose to stay in Massachusetts, driven by a sense of duty to honor the commitments we had made and to carry forward my mother's legacy. This decision, while challenging, was a testament to my resolve to follow God's plan, embracing the paths He sets before us, no matter where they lead.

Donta, my son, was scheduled to move to Massachusetts to live with us that year, and my mother planned to accompany him, intending to stay with us for a month. Unfortunately, tragedy struck,

preventing this from happening. As I reflect on the journey to acquiring our home—a home my mother never got to see—I am deeply moved. The loss resonates profoundly as I navigate the next chapters of our lives. Despite my grief, I was eager for Donta to join us after her passing. Yet, after reflecting on previous situations, I came to understand that moving him right away may not have been the best decision for him. My sister insisted he stay another year, a sentiment echoed by my father during a heartfelt consultation. It felt like *déjà vu*—my earlier longing to move to Charlotte unfulfilled, and now my desire to have Donta with us delayed. But after deep prayer and consideration, I recognized what was best for him, so he stayed back for his seventh-grade year. However, the narrative takes a hopeful turn as he eventually made the move, marking the beginning of a new chapter for us.

As time progressed, the intricate tapestry of life's challenges and lessons became more apparent, each contributing to my journey of self-discovery and resilience. The absence of my mother's guidance, once just a phone call away, left a void, yet it also taught me the strength of the human spirit. Looking forward to Donta's arrival and fresh starts brought comfort and a sense of continuity. Reflecting on our time in Boston, I am reminded of the power of hope and the human capacity to adapt and thrive amidst adversity. With one chapter closing, I look toward the future with a rejuvenated spirit and a steadfast belief in the path laid out before us. Ready to embrace the upcoming challenges and triumphs, I carry forward the lessons learned, and the unbreakable bonds formed, all of which affirm the transformative journey of life.

Here are a couple of Bible verses that provide comfort and hope in overcoming the grief of losing a loved one like a mother:

1. **Revelation 21:4** - *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

2. **Psalm 34:18** - *“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

These verses remind us of God’s promise of eternal peace and his close presence during times of profound sorrow and loss.

Chapter Ten

A New Beginning in Boston



During this challenging period, the weight of stress and pressure accumulated relentlessly. As I grappled with the profound grief of losing my mother—a pivotal figure in my life—and the guilt of feeling that I had let my son and family down, my daily routine began to unravel. Amidst this turmoil, my physical health

also took a hit; I noticed my weight climbing up to 186 pounds. This was a stark reminder of how personal struggles were manifesting physically. My job became increasingly demanding, contributing to a significant amount of stress, which compounded the personal and professional challenges I was facing. This confluence of emotional and professional issues prompted a period of deep introspection and the realisation that substantial changes were necessary.

Initially, in 2014, I faced a pivotal opportunity to venture into the transportation business, an option I unfortunately let pass. Reflecting on that decision now, I see it as a regrettable oversight. However, my resolve to make meaningful changes was rekindled by my desire to spend more quality time with my son Donta, who was set to move to Massachusetts. The inflexible demands of my position at Coca-Cola were increasingly incompatible with the personal flexibility I needed, leading me to make a decisive move. On January 22, 2015, I enrolled in an automotive detailing school, in San Diego, CA, embracing my long-standing passion for automobiles and their upkeep. I pursued this new path vigorously, obtaining certifications and eventually establishing my own detailing business with an LLC. My strategy was clear: I would focus on detailing cars during evenings and weekends, aiming to grow my business slowly and eventually move away from my corporate job. This plan represented not just a professional shift, but a crucial step towards reclaiming control over my life and priorities.

As 2015 unfolded, I experienced a defining moment when I detailed my first car in April. This marked the humble beginnings of my journey toward financial independence through my own busi-

ness. Despite the initial success, the earnings were not yet sufficient to completely cut ties with Coca-Cola. Around the same time, the transportation sector presented itself again, bringing with it a promising opportunity to boost my income. Within just two weeks of engaging in this new venture, I earned significantly more than I would in a typical month at Coca-Cola. This success fueled my excitement and solidified my readiness to transition fully into entrepreneurship.

The importance of a strategic exit plan from my regular job became crystal clear by July 2015. My entrepreneurial efforts were starting to pay off, providing me not only with financial freedom but also the flexibility to travel to Alabama and reconnect with my son, Donta. This reunion was much more than just a familial gathering; it signified the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. As we departed from the familiar dirt road of Alabama, I saw the mixture of anticipation and resolve in Donta's eyes. He was not just leaving home but was also excited about the new adventures that awaited in Massachusetts. Although part of me still wondered about the life we might have had in Charlotte, North Carolina, our journey to Massachusetts was filled with a mix of joy and confidence. This period was transformative, not just in pursuing new business opportunities but in reshaping my life's priorities to foster deeper connections with my family and fully embrace the challenges and rewards of entrepreneurship. The move was not only a physical relocation but a significant emotional leap, proving that with adaptability and resilience, we could thrive in our new environment.

As the summer of 2015 came to an end, Donta was making notable strides in Massachusetts. He became actively involved in the youth ministry at our church every Friday, which was instrumental in building a solid foundation for him. Additionally, he assisted me in our car detailing business, where he was developing a strong work ethic. The transition to this new environment was exhilarating yet daunting, particularly as he braced for the upcoming school year, which started later than it did back in the South.

The sense of anticipation was mingled with my own increasing desire to move on from my job at Coca-Cola. While I had initially hoped the detailing business would allow me to leave Coca-Cola, it became evident that additional income was necessary. Fortuitously, an opportunity to purchase a transportation business presented itself, which I seized, adding a vital revenue stream. Over the following months, Donta adjusted well, fostering new friendships and becoming an integral part of our expanding community network, including people like my prayer partner Keith and his wife, who introduced us to our now-close friends and family, Marc and Ve. My friend Anthony also played a significant role as Donta's godfather.

As Donta's eighth grade year progressed smoothly, he thrived in his new setting, actively engaging with our church community. However, a persistent thought lingered in my mind about relocating to Charlotte, North Carolina, before Donta commenced high school. I decided to make this move before his ninth-grade year, considering high school a crucial period for his personal growth. My aim was to offer him the most supportive environment during this significant stage of his life.

As Donta's eighth grade year wrapped up, our family's focus sharpened on maintaining an active and healthy lifestyle. My wife and I were flourishing, and yet the allure of moving to North Carolina grew stronger each day. Yet, Donta had become deeply embedded in Massachusetts, forging new friendships and eagerly anticipating high school football, which made the thought of relocating increasingly complex. Regina, who was born and raised in Massachusetts, expressed a strong reluctance to leave. By January 2016, I had reached a significant personal milestone by transitioning to full-time entrepreneurship, stepping away from Coca-Cola. This shift, while financially challenging, significantly alleviated my stress and empowered me to take control of my future.

By June, as Donta celebrated his middle school graduation, I was fully immersed in the transportation business as a livery business owner, continuously expanding my knowledge of the industry. During this time, I met John, a great businessman, and over the years, we became great friends. However, just a month after my transition, we were shaken by a serious health challenge involving Regina. Our faith and the power of prayer were crucial in navigating this difficult period. I also felt a growing inclination towards my original passion for health and wellness. Although I explored the possibility of opening a health club franchise, this venture ultimately did not come to fruition. Meanwhile, I noticed the sedentary nature of my work was adversely affecting my physical health; I had reached 211 pounds, a wake-up call that led to a renewed commitment to improving my fitness and dietary habits. This pivotal moment marked the beginning

of a new chapter in my personal wellness journey, driven by a desire to model healthy living for my family.

By 2016, Donta had embarked on his freshman year of high school, marking a period of significant challenge and growth for our family. Around the same time, I committed myself to another journey of health and wellness—a journey that would profoundly impact me. Looking back, I can confidently say this particular endeavor brought out the best in me, instilling the discipline I needed to sustain a healthier lifestyle indefinitely. This phase of my life is one I look forward to sharing in detail in the upcoming final chapter, Chapter eleven, which promises to be a riveting culmination of my experiences. As I navigated this period of personal growth, I continued to manage my transportation and auto detailing businesses, which provided a steady backdrop to my evolving fitness goals and the new lessons I was learning each day about maintaining wellness amid a busy life.

In 2018, during a morning prayer session, I met a gentleman named Darren who was leading the prayer session. This serendipitous meeting sparked a conversation that soon evolved into a fruitful exchange of business insights. Darren, who drove for Uber, shared his interest in starting an Airbnb venture and inquired about my experience with Turo and Getaround—car sharing services that were new to me at the time. Encouraged by our discussion, I agreed to help him navigate these platforms. Concurrently, my commitment to health was deepening as I explored various dietary strategies to optimize my busy schedule, including intermittent fasting, which not only facilitated weight loss but also improved my mental clarity.

Over the following months, Darren and I regularly exchanged ideas, and he eventually persuaded me to consider expanding my car detailing business to cater specifically to Turo and Getaround vehicles. Despite my initial hesitation, influenced by Regina's cautious stance on starting a new business endeavor, we both gradually recognised the potential benefits. Eventually, Regina warmed up to the idea, acknowledging that this could indeed be a lucrative venture. Thus, we decided to expand our business operations to include these services, stepping into a new realm of opportunity that seamlessly integrated our financial goals with my ongoing journey in health and wellness.

During this transformative period, I also ventured into the rental car business full-time, which presented significant financial challenges. I collaborated with my brother to acquire our first rental car, continuing to run my auto detailing and transportation businesses. My relationship with Darren, strengthened by our shared entrepreneurial spirit and initial meetings at a prayer group, evolved into a close partnership. We even introduced a third partner, Andre, a skilled BMW technician/ mechanic I knew, leading to the formation of a profitable three-way partnership. Each of us began earning about \$1,000 per car monthly from this venture, demonstrating the success of our collaborative efforts.

However, like any business, we faced our share of challenges, especially as November marked the beginning of a difficult period. Coincidentally, during that month, a random encounter with an insurance broker while working in my transportation business opened

up an unexpected opportunity. He sought guidance for his daughter, who was embarking on a health and wellness journey similar to mine. Despite my lack of formal certification, he valued my practical experience and encouraged me to assist her. This encounter was pivotal, reinforcing the value of my personal health journey and inspiring me to pursue formal training to become a certified health coach. Amid these professional developments, I received somber news from Alabama: my last surviving grandparent, Emma Raby, had passed away. This loss brought profound sadness, prompting Donta and me to travel to Alabama to say our final goodbyes, marking a poignant moment of reflection amidst a year of significant change and growth.

As I juggled managing all three businesses, the dynamics within our partnership changed. By November, a split occurred; Andre and I continued as partners while Darren chose to pursue different opportunities—a decision that ultimately benefited us all. Throughout 2019, my partnership with Andre strengthened, and our relationship grew deeper, he's like a brother to me. I had the privilege of witnessing significant milestones in his life, including his marriage and the birth of his children. Our shared business, Capital Car Management, not only thrived but also cemented our bond. As we continued to invest in our venture, Andre and I also nurtured individual aspirations within the health and wellness sector. The support from Andre and his wife, Monica, has been invaluable, providing a stable foundation for both our business endeavors and personal growth. This partnership and the accompanying support have been instrumental in my development as an entrepreneur and health coach, underscoring the importance of collaboration and mutual support in navigating the challenges and rewards of business ownership.

As 2019 unfolded, it proved to be a year replete with both daunting challenges and significant rewards, encapsulating a transformative period in both my personal and professional life. The correlation between the trials faced and the victories achieved underscored a vital lesson—that enduring challenge is essential for reaping substantial rewards. Amidst these challenges, the rental car business began to flourish, necessitating a strategic reduction in my auto detailing operations to accommodate the growing demands of the rental sector. Concurrently, I achieved a personal milestone by reducing my weight to 176 pounds at the age of 43, a feat that brought immense satisfaction and reinforced my commitment to maintaining health as a priority. I adopted a disciplined diet, eating healthily for six and a half days each week, a regimen I vowed to adhere to moving forward.

As 2019 came to a close and the world grappled with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself deeply reflecting on my career and passions during this period of global uncertainty. This introspection led me to shift my focus more intently toward health and wellness. Initially, I had considered enrolling in the Institute of Integrative Nutrition, but at my wife Regina’s suggestion, I chose the Dr. Sears Health and Wellness Institute instead. This decision was crucial, paving the way for a significant evolution in my professional life. One morning, during a prayer session, I felt a profound sense of divine inspiration—God revealed to me the name for my health coaching business: NEW U Health and Wellness Coaching. This name came to me even before I had officially become a health coach. As I prepare to launch Chapter 11 of this journey, I’m filled with anticipation and excitement for the future. The founding of NEW

U Health and Wellness represents not just a new chapter in my life but also an opportunity to align my career with my commitment to health and wellness, leveraging my experiences and the connections I've made to explore new possibilities in this field.

Here are two Bible verses that exemplify overcoming change and embarking on a journey towards prosperity:

1. **Joshua 1:9** - *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”* This verse captures the moment when Joshua is about to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, a significant change and new beginning, filled with the promise of prosperity.

2. **Isaiah 43:19** - *“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”* This verse speaks to God's promise of renewal and providence, guiding His people through change and leading them into a prosperous future, even from the most barren circumstances.

Chapter Eleven

My Journey to Start New U Health and Wellness



As you turn the pages to the final chapter of my book, I extend my heartfelt thanks to each of you who have journeyed with me through the narrative of my ups and downs in life, health and wellness. The best, as they say, is saved for last, so stay with me as we dive into these concluding reflections. The year 2020 is memorable not only for the global impact of COVID-19 that the world will always remember but also as a deeply transformative year for me on a

personal level. After a hiatus of 23 years, I made the pivotal decision to return to school, reigniting my passion for learning and personal development. Simultaneously, it was the year my son, Donta, graduated from high school—a milestone that was both joyous and unconventional due to the pandemic. His graduation, a drive-through ceremony, was a poignant reminder of the unique challenges these times presented, marking an unforgettable moment in our lives.

In March 2020, as the world grappled with unprecedented shutdowns, I embarked on a transformative journey by enrolling in the Dr. Sears Wellness Institute. My goal was ambitious: to become a master health coach. This path required me to navigate through two critical stages of health coaching—Families, Adults & Seniors—before advancing to the Master program. The initial stage focused on Families was a six-week course, particularly resonant for me as I felt a divine calling during this shutdown to aid Families and Teenagers. This stage was not just about learning; it required passing a rigorous exit exam. Memories of similar exams back in Alabama made this a daunting prospect, but with determination, I passed, drawing on study techniques I had honed years earlier at Shelton State Community College.

The journey through the second life stage, which centered on Adults and Seniors, was equally challenging. Upon completion, another exit exam awaited, testing my resolve once more. Thankfully, my faith and the foundational skills I had acquired saw me through. By June 2020, I had successfully cleared both stages, but doubts began to cloud my vision. Support from friends like Tory and Joshua proved invaluable, encouraging me not to halt my progress. Even

though my business activities surged in mid-2020, leading me to consider postponing my Master Certification, I decided to delay it until September with the goal of finishing by April 2021. This pause allowed me to reflect deeply on my commitment to health coaching. During this interlude, I continued practicing as a health coach for Families and Adults, enriching lives while managing a thriving rental car business. The pull to abandon my Master Certification grew, but the steadfast encouragement from my wife and friends helped maintain my focus on achieving this pinnacle qualification. I am truly blessed to have met people who have spoke to the purpose, destiny and greatness inside of me and while there are many, there is one recent connection, that has made an indelible imprint in my life, that I'd like to highlight. I'd like to thank God for orchestrating the strategic moment that I met Bishop B. Courtney McBath, in 2020/2021 while providing his transportation needs as a guest speaker at my church. Initially, we both connected as "Southern country boys" but our relationship grew deeper and became more familial over time. As the great leader that Bishop B. Courtney McBath is, he recognized things inside of me that I didn't recognize or if I did recognize, I failed to see, and pulled and coached the potential in me, even stating that God has placed me in his life for a purpose and at the divine time it was supposed to occur. Thank you, Bishop B. Courtney McBath, for "seeing" me!

April 12, 2021, my 44th birthday, marked a significant milestone—I graduated as a Master Certified Health Coach from Dr. Sears Wellness Institute. This achievement was not just a personal triumph but a moment to acknowledge the tremendous support from dear friends like Otha and Joshua. The practicum, which could

be completed online due to pandemic adaptations, was a hurdle I managed to clear with a high distinction, scoring 78 out of a possible 80. Opting not to read the grading rubric allowed me to coach in a more natural, unscripted manner—a decision that paid off as it freed me from the constraints that others felt who adhered strictly to the guidelines. This approach resonated deeply with my coaching style, emphasizing authenticity over formality. As I prepared to launch my coaching business, I reflected on the entire journey—a path marked by challenges and supported by enduring friendships, faith, and a relentless pursuit of personal and professional growth. This chapter of my life was not just about acquiring a title but about deepening my understanding of wellness and extending this knowledge to help others lead healthier, more fulfilled lives.

After completing my schooling in 2021, I decided to take a well-deserved break before launching my health coaching business. This pause was crucial, not just for personal rejuvenation but also for preparing to immerse fully into the world of health coaching. If you're reading this and know someone on a similar path, I highly recommend they take this time to reflect and regroup—the more you coach, the better you become. However, 2021 was not without its challenges. During a visit to Charlotte, North Carolina, in November, where I reconnected with my roots and visited family, I returned to a troubling situation—my wife was unwell. Subsequently, we faced another health challenge together, and in December, amidst dealing with this, I suffered the heartbreaking loss of my youngest brother Darren. This compounded grief required me to balance mourning with supporting my wife, strengthening my resolve and

faith through the support of our church family at Jubilee Christian Church in Massachusetts.

As 2022 dawned, things began to look up, signalling the right moment to initiate my health coaching venture. With all necessary certifications in hand, I was ready, although the rental car business faced its own set of challenges that needed attention. By December 2022, NEW U Health and Wellness was officially founded. Starting the business, building a website, and navigating the initial phases turned out to be among the hardest tasks I'd ever undertaken. Despite these difficulties, I was driven by a divine calling—a purpose I had long evaded but now fully embraced. We all have a purpose that, when fulfilled, can profoundly impact the world, and this was my time to honor that calling. By 2023, my website was operational, yet attracting clientele proved more daunting than anticipated. After encountering countless ads and consulting various marketing gurus, I stumbled upon Kingdom Builders Academy. This discovery was pivotal as I learned that launching a successful coaching business was not just about having the skills but also about being visible and well-known in the industry. Knowing that 90% of new coaches struggle to establish themselves, I was determined to overcome these odds. With every challenge I've faced and surmounted in life, this was yet another hurdle I was prepared to tackle head-on, fueled by every triumph and trial of my journey.

In 2023, I took a significant step in my professional development by reaching out to Kingdom Builders Academy (KBA), a move driven by my commitment to enhancing my health coaching career. The staff at KBA were incredibly welcoming, facilitating a rigorous in-

terview process that reflected my cautious approach, especially after significant investments in my website. This cautious approach paid off, and by the end of July, I was enrolled for the September trimester. This enrollment marked a transformative period in my coaching journey, immersing me into KBA's vibrant community. The experience not only amplified my business from enhancing client engagement to boosting my social media presence but also allowed for a complete overhaul of my website. This was strategically tailored to better serve coaches and consultants, embodying the patience and divine guidance that had steered my path thus far. Throughout my time at KBA, I acquired invaluable skills in promotion and managing a successful coaching practice, coupled with encouraging updates on my wife's improving health.

May 23, 2024, significant milestones were anticipated; my son Donta graduated from college, and I will be completing my program at KBA in September of 2024. By then, I will have mastered a diverse array of skills spanning from social media strategies to book writing, covering all six courses offered by the academy. These skills are intended not merely for personal growth but are tools I am actively using to fulfill my calling to impact the world positively. With this comprehensive skill set, I am better equipped to advance my ultimate goal through NEW U Health and Wellness Coaching —eradicating struggles faced by individuals and families dealing with health issues, weight management, depression, bullying, and learning disabilities. My aim is to offer unwavering support, guidance, and empowerment to those in need, transcending age or background, fostering a community where health and wellness are accessible to all.

Reflecting on this journey, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for every step that has brought me to this precipice of the future. As I invite readers and followers to join me on this transformative mission, it's a call to collectively enhance the wellbeing of communities worldwide. Together, we have the power to forge a brighter, healthier future for generations to come. This mission resonates deeply with my own life's story—a small-town country boy from Gallion, Alabama, who could have never imagined his journey would take him from that dirt road in Alabama to Washington State and back to that dirt road, and eventually to Massachusetts. Now, I'm prepared to take health and wellness global. If you've been moved by my story or know someone struggling with health and wellness, remember, if a country boy from a dirt road can make it, truly, anyone can.

As I close this chapter of my story and gear up to elevate health and wellness to unprecedented levels, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to you, the reader, for joining me on this profound journey. This book is not just a recounting of my personal experiences—it's a shared pathway to transforming lives globally, an invitation to join a movement where each step we take is a purposeful stride toward betterment.

My mission and purpose are crystallised in every page you've turned, each chapter a steppingstone in advocating for a healthier, more empowered society. It's been a privilege to share these insights and experiences with you, hoping to inspire change and foster a community committed to health and wellness. For those who see themselves or their loved ones in these pages, remember that help is just a click away at www.newuhealthandwellness.com, where my

team and I are ready to assist you in becoming the best version of yourself—the NEW U.

As a token of my appreciation for your time and engagement, I have included a special gift for you at the conclusion of this book. This gift is a small part of a much larger commitment to health and wellness, a tool to help you embark on your journey to a healthier life. This is just the beginning, and I invite you to continue with us on this transformative adventure. Remember, the path to becoming a NEW U is ongoing, and together, we can achieve the extraordinary.

Thank you once again for your trust and companionship throughout this narrative. Your participation is not just passive reading; it is an active step towards embracing wellness and making impactful changes. As we move forward, let's keep the momentum alive, using the foundations laid in these pages to build a brighter, healthier future for ourselves and for generations to come. You are now equipped not only with knowledge but with a tool that we hope will inspire and facilitate your journey towards achieving your health goals. Let's continue making strides together, turning the vision of NEW U into a reality for all.

Chapter Twelve

3 Strategies to Become the Best Version of Yourself: Nutrition, Exercise, Wellness - Understanding How It All Works Together!!

1 . N - Nutrition: Eating a whole food diet offers a myriad of benefits for overall health and well-being. Whole foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, are rich in essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals that support various bodily functions. This nutritional abundance contributes to improved energy levels, enhanced immune function, and better digestion. Additionally, whole foods often contain high amounts of fiber, aiding in weight management and promoting cardiovascular health. Choosing whole, unprocessed foods over highly refined options helps regulate blood sugar levels and reduces the risk of chronic diseases.

Embracing a whole food diet not only nourishes the body but also supports a sustainable and balanced approach to long-term health.

2. E - Exercise: Engaging in regular exercise, specifically 2 to 3 times a week, brings significant value to one's life by promoting better overall quality of life. Physical activity has been linked to improved mood, reduced stress, and enhanced cognitive function. Regular exercise contributes to the maintenance of a healthy weight, strengthens muscles and bones, and supports cardiovascular health. Beyond the physical benefits, consistent workouts can boost self-esteem and foster a sense of accomplishment. Establishing a routine of 2 to 3 weekly exercise sessions not only aids in preventing chronic diseases but also enhances sleep quality, increases energy levels, and cultivates a more vibrant and fulfilling lifestyle. The positive impact of regular physical activity extends far beyond the gym, influencing mental and emotional well-being for a more satisfying and balanced life.

3. W - Wellness: Embracing wellness and cultivating a positive mindset go hand in hand, fostering a holistic approach to overall well-being. A positive mindset serves as a powerful tool in navigating life's challenges, reducing stress, and enhancing mental resilience. When coupled with wellness practices, such as regular exercise, balanced nutrition, and sufficient rest, it creates a harmonious synergy. Positive thinking has been associated with lower levels of inflammation, improved cardiovascular health, and strengthened immune function. Furthermore, a focus on wellness encourages mindfulness, self-care, and the development of healthy habits, promoting a sense of purpose and fulfillment. By prioritising both mental outlook and physical health, individuals can experience a profound and sustained enhancement in their overall quality of life.

4. U - Understanding How It All Works Together: Understanding the interconnected dynamics nutrition, exercise, and wellness is crucial for achieving optimal health. Nutrition provides the essential building blocks for the body's functions, influencing energy levels, immune response, and overall vitality. When paired with regular exercise, the body becomes more efficient at utilizing these nutrients, promoting better muscle strength, cardiovascular health, and metabolic balance. Wellness, encompassing mental and emotional aspects, is enhanced through the harmonious integration of nutritious eating and physical activity. A balanced combination of proper nutrition and exercise contributes to weight management, stress reduction, and improved sleep quality. This holistic approach creates a positive feedback loop, where good health practices reinforce one another, leading to a comprehensive sense of well-being. Recognizing and actively incorporating the synergies between nutrition, exercise, and wellness forms the foundation for a sustainable and vibrant lifestyle.

As a passionate health coach, my mission is to empower families in building a solid foundation of well-being through a holistic approach. I believe in the synergy of nutrition, exercise, and wellness, recognizing how these elements intricately work together to foster a healthy lifestyle. Guiding families through personalized strategies, I aim to impart not only knowledge but also the practical tools needed to make sustainable choices. It's about understanding the interconnectedness of nutrition and exercise, and how fostering overall wellness contributes a positive lifestyle.

Chapter Thirteen

Client Time Management Sheet

Date: _____

Client Goals for the Week:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Morning Routine:

- Wake up at _____ AM
- Hydrate with a glass of water
- Engage in _____ minutes of mindful breathing or meditation
- Enjoy a balanced breakfast consisting of _____

Morning Tasks:

- Complete morning hygiene routine: _____ AM to _____ AM
- Plan and prepare healthy meals for the day: _____ AM to _____ AM

- Review and organize tasks for the day: _____ AM to _____
AM

- Engage in physical activity or exercise: _____ AM to _____
AM

Midday Break:

- Take a break for _____ minutes to stretch and relax

- Have a nutritious snack: _____

Afternoon Tasks:

- Stay hydrated throughout the day by drinking water: _____
PM to _____ PM

- Eat a healthy lunch: _____ PM to _____ PM

- Complete any assigned tasks or goals: _____ PM to _____
PM

- Take short breaks to rest and recharge: _____ PM to _____
PM

Evening Routine:

- Wind down with a calming activity: _____ PM to _____
PM

- Reflect on achievements and challenges of the day: _____ PM
to _____ PM

- Prepare and enjoy a balanced dinner: _____ PM to _____
PM

- Establish a bedtime routine for adequate rest: _____ PM to
_____ PM

Additional Notes:

-

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- This time management sheet helps you prioritize and structure your day for optimal health. Adjust the timings and tasks as needed.

Chapter Fourteen

7 Day Meal Plan for Family with Children and Teens

A balanced diet plan for a family with children and teenagers for seven days:

Day 1:

- Breakfast: Scrambled eggs with whole grain toast and sliced avocado
- Snack: Greek yogurt with mixed berries
- Lunch: Turkey and cheese whole wheat wraps with carrot sticks and hummus
- Snack: Apple slices with almond butter
- Dinner: Baked salmon with quinoa and roasted broccoli

Day 2:

- Breakfast: Whole grain oatmeal with banana slices and a sprinkle of cinnamon
- Snack: Baby carrots with ranch dip

- Lunch: Chicken salad with mixed greens, cherry tomatoes, and whole grain crackers
- Snack: Cheese slices with whole grain crackers
- Dinner: Vegetable stir-fry with tofu and brown rice

Day 3:

- Breakfast: Whole grain pancakes with fresh strawberries and a drizzle of honey
- Snack: Celery sticks with peanut butter
- Lunch: Whole wheat pasta salad with cherry tomatoes, cucumber, and grilled chicken
- Snack: Orange slices
- Dinner: Lean beef tacos with lettuce, tomato, cheese, and whole wheat tortillas

Day 4:

- Breakfast: Greek yogurt parfait with granola and sliced peaches
- Snack: Mixed nuts
- Lunch: Turkey and veggie whole wheat pita pockets with cucumber slices
- Snack: Frozen grapes
- Dinner: Grilled shrimp skewers with quinoa salad and steamed green beans

Day 5:

- Breakfast: Whole grain toast with mashed avocado and poached eggs
- Snack: Trail mix with dried fruit and nuts
- Lunch: Veggie and cheese quesadillas with salsa and guacamole

- Snack: Sliced bell peppers with hummus
- Dinner: Baked chicken breast with sweet potato wedges and steamed broccoli

Day 6:

- Breakfast: Smoothie made with spinach, banana, almond milk, and protein powder
- Snack: Cottage cheese with pineapple chunks
- Lunch: Whole wheat wrap with tuna salad, lettuce, and tomato
- Snack: Whole grain crackers with cheese slices
- Dinner: Veggie and bean chili served with a side of whole grain cornbread

Day 7:

- Breakfast: Whole grain waffles with mixed berries and a dollop of Greek yogurt
- Snack: Edamame
- Lunch: Grilled cheese sandwiches on whole wheat bread with tomato soup
- Snack: Sliced cucumbers with ranch dip
- Dinner: Baked tilapia with brown rice pilaf and steamed asparagus

Make sure to adjust portion sizes and ingredients according to the specific dietary needs and preferences of your family members. Additionally, encourage hydration throughout the day by offering water or herbal teas as beverages.

Chapter Fifteen

7 Day Meal Plan for High Schoolers and College Students

Here's a Meal plan for High Schoolers and college students:

Day 1:

- Breakfast: Scrambled eggs with spinach and avocado, served with a side of turkey bacon.
- Snack: Greek yogurt with mixed nuts.
- Lunch: Grilled chicken salad with mixed greens, cherry tomatoes, cucumber, and olive oil vinaigrette.
- Snack: Sliced bell peppers with hummus.
- Dinner: Baked salmon with quinoa and steamed broccoli, drizzled with lemon juice and olive oil.

Day 2:

- Breakfast: Protein smoothie made with spinach, almond milk, protein powder, and a tablespoon of almond butter.
- Snack: Cottage cheese with sliced almonds.

- Lunch: Turkey and avocado lettuce wraps with a side of sliced cucumber and cherry tomatoes.

- Snack: Hard-boiled eggs.

- Dinner: Grilled shrimp with zucchini noodles and marinara sauce, topped with grated Parmesan cheese.

Day 3:

- Breakfast: Omelet with mushrooms, onions, and feta cheese, cooked in olive oil.

- Snack: Greek yogurt with berries.

- Lunch: Tuna salad with mixed greens, olives, and a lemon-tahini dressing.

- Snack: Celery sticks with almond butter.

- Dinner: Baked chicken thighs with roasted Brussels sprouts and a side of quinoa.

Day 4:

- Breakfast: Protein pancakes made with almond flour and topped with Greek yogurt and berries.

- Snack: Mixed nuts and seeds.

- Lunch: Grilled steak salad with arugula, cherry tomatoes, and avocado, dressed with balsamic vinaigrette.

- Snack: Sliced cucumber with cream cheese.

- Dinner: Baked cod with roasted asparagus and a side of cauliflower rice.

Day 5:

- Breakfast: Scrambled eggs with smoked salmon and a side of sautéed spinach.

- Snack: Protein shake made with almond milk, protein powder, and a handful of spinach.

- Lunch: Chicken and vegetable stir-fry with broccoli, bell peppers, and snap peas, served over cauliflower rice.

- Snack: Turkey jerky.

- Dinner: Grilled tofu with stir-fried and brown rice.

Day 6:

- Breakfast: Greek yogurt parfait with granola, mixed berries, and a drizzle of honey.

- Snack: Cottage cheese with pineapple chunks and a sprinkle of chia seeds.

- Lunch: Turkey and cheese roll-ups with lettuce, tomato, and avocado.

- Snack: Almond butter with apple slices.

- Dinner: Baked pork chops with roasted carrots and a side of quinoa salad.

Day 7:

- Breakfast: Frittata made with eggs, spinach, feta cheese, and sun-dried tomatoes.

- Snack: Protein bar.

- Lunch: Grilled chicken Caesar salad with romaine lettuce, cherry tomatoes, and Caesar dressing.

- Snack: Sliced bell peppers with guacamole.

- Dinner: Beef and vegetable kebabs with grilled zucchini and a side of mashed cauliflower.

Ensure to adjust portion sizes according to individual calorie and nutritional needs and encourage hydration by drinking water throughout the day. Additionally, feel free to customize the meal plan based on personal preferences and dietary restrictions.

Chapter Sixteen

Conclusion

As I conclude this book, I am filled with profound gratitude for each and every one of you who took the time to read these pages. It is my sincere prayer and hope that the words contained within these chapters have been of great value to your life, or perhaps to someone dear to you.

Reflecting back on my journey, from my childhood to adulthood, I am reminded of the countless individuals who have played a pivotal role in shaping the person I am today. To those who stood by me, offering unwavering support and encouragement, I extend my deepest thanks. And to those who doubted me, your skepticism only fueled my determination to prove you wrong. Both experiences have contributed to the resilience and strength that define me today.

From my high school years to college and beyond, I have been blessed with a network of friends, mentors, and loved ones who have walked alongside me through every triumph and challenge. In a world where we are designed to be in community, I am grateful for the companionship and guidance that have propelled me forward on this journey.

I am indebted to my parents, Minnie and Dennis, for instilling in me the values of hard work, perseverance, and faith. Their unwavering support has been a constant source of strength, and I carry their legacy with me in all that I do.

As I pen these final words, I am humbled by the realisation that my journey is far from over. The continuation of this book is but a testament to the ongoing evolution of my life's story. I am excited for what the future holds, knowing that I am surrounded by a community of supporters who believe in me and my mission.

To each and every one of you who have joined me on this journey, I express my heartfelt appreciation. May God bless you and keep you, and may we continue to inspire and uplift one another as we navigate the path ahead.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following individuals who have supported me throughout my journey:

To my cherished wife Regina, your steadfast support and love have been the bedrock of my life. Blessed beyond measure, I am profoundly grateful to have you by my side. You embody grace and blessing in every aspect of my life. Your unwavering presence through both triumphs and trials fortifies my spirit, and I am eternally thankful for all that you have done. The strength you provide is immeasurable, and I could never adequately repay the love and commitment you have shown. Together, we will venture forward, driven by our

shared purpose, ready to impact the world, grateful for your endless support.

Donta, my son, your patience and insights have immensely improved my ability to connect with the younger generation. Witnessing your growth and seeing the limitless potential ahead, fills me with immense pride. Remember always that the only limits you face are those you place upon yourself; your path is yours to forge.

To my late mother, Minnie aka Sally

Your love nurtures my soul daily, guiding me to spread kindness and compassion just as you did. Despite our limited resources, the love within our family was boundless. Your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed, and I strive daily to live up to the example you set. I cherish every memory, each moment of encouragement, hearing your voice in my heart, cheering me on and believing in me unwaveringly. Thank you for standing by me through all the tough years, from elementary school to high school. You always fought for me, your baby, and never let me fail. I appreciate everything you did for me.

To my father, Dennis, your incredible work ethic and commitment have profoundly shaped my values and ambitions. Your example taught me the dignity in labor and the importance of pursuing joy alongside responsibility. I carry your teachings with me, not just in moments of hard work but also in times of relaxation and joy, urging you too to embrace life's lighter moments.

To my Mother-In-Law Johnnie Mae Sanders, who I affectionately call Mama, thank you for your support and for loving and treating

me as a son not a son-in-law. You always have a word of encouragement for me which means so much and it's just when I need it most.

To my Father-In-Law James Otis Sanders, whom I affectionately call Pops, thank you too for your support and for loving and treating me as a son not a son-in-law. You're a man of few words but your actions speak loudly.

Sandra, my sister, your guidance and support have been instrumental in shaping the man I am today, thank you for being my pillar.

Levy, affectionately known as Sarge, my brother, your ongoing support and the warm welcome into your Washington state home have meant the world to me.

To my late brother Darren, your life was a profound blessing, and your memory a continuous light in my life.

To my little sister Ashley, thank you for your unwavering support and presence. Each of you has enriched my life immeasurably, and for this, I am forever grateful.

Thank you all for walking this journey with me, influencing my life profoundly, and helping mold my narrative into one of purpose and perseverance.

I am deeply grateful for the unyielding love and support of my aunts, uncles, and cousins from both sides of my family. Your presence has significantly shaped my life, providing comfort and joy in

times of need and celebration. In every step of my journey, your encouragement and love have been instrumental, leaving an indelible mark on my heart and guiding me through various challenges and triumphs. Additionally, I hold a profound appreciation for my grandparents, Elmore and Rosie Robertson and Clifton and Emma Raby, whose wisdom and guidance have been nothing short of foundational. Their love continues to be a guiding light for me, and though they are no longer physically with me, their spirits and teachings resonate daily. Their memories are a beacon of inspiration and comfort, reminding me of their everlasting influence in my life.

In remembrance of my Uncle Carnell, Uncle Roland, and Aunt Gail, and all those dear family members who have passed on, your legacies endure through the cherished memories and the profound impact you've made on our lives. Uncle Carnell, your transformative work in Buffalo, NY has left a lasting imprint on countless lives, and your spirit continues to inspire. Aunt Gail, I fondly recall how you encouraged me to stay with you during my college years, a decision that could have shaped my path differently—I cherish the connections and friendships your kindness facilitated, especially my bond with Tory, who has become like a brother to me. Uncle Roland, your philosophies on life and your strategic approach to living—prioritizing early retirement, real estate, and living below one's means—remain lessons I carry forward. For my living relatives, though not all mentioned by name here, your roles in my life are no less significant. If your name is not listed, it symbolizes that your story is still unfolding, and your purpose given by God continues. Your ongoing journey is a testament to the work still left to do in this world. I eagerly anticipate your reactions to this book and look forward to our

continued connections. To everyone mentioned in this book and all who have touched my life, thank you. Your influence has made my journey not only possible but truly worthwhile.

With heartfelt appreciation,
Vidal Raby

As a passionate health coach, my mission is to empower families in building a solid foundation of well-being through a holistic approach. I believe in the synergy of nutrition, exercise, and wellness, recognizing how these elements intricately work together to foster a healthy lifestyle. Guiding families through personalized strategies, I aim to impart not only knowledge but also the practical tools needed to make sustainable choices. It's about understanding the interconnectedness of nutrition and exercise, and how fostering overall wellness contributes to a vibrant and fulfilling life. Together, let's embark on a journey towards health, vitality and a harmonious balance that extends beyond individual wellbeing to enrich the lives of entire families, communities and across generations.

Thank you for taking your time to read my Book! Let us work together and form a partnership so that you can become the NEW U and best version of yourself!

Sincerely,
Vidal Raby, CHC/MCHC/CLC
Contact: coachv@newuhealthandwellness.com
Website:
<http://www.newuhealthandwellness.com>



New Skills
ACADEMY

ID: NGE4Q07DWX

CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT

THIS CERTIFICATE IS PRESENTED TO

Vidal Raby

FOR COMPLETING THE

Life Coaching Certification

on 2nd Feb 2022

Selena Hurford

Selena Hurford
COURSE TUTOR



DR SEARS WELLNESS INSTITUTE

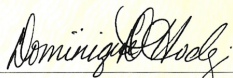
THIS CERTIFIES THAT

VIDAL DONTA RABY

HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE REQUIREMENTS AND IS HEREBY DESIGNATED AS A

CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH

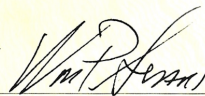
On the 25th day of May in the year 2020



Dominique Hodgkin, Executive Director of Education



Kelly Abel, Lead Instructor



William Sears, M.D.



Robert Hodgkin, President & CEO

DR SEARS WELLNESS INSTITUTE

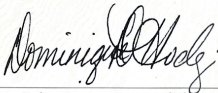
THIS CERTIFIES THAT

VIDAL DONTA RABY

HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE REQUIREMENTS AND IS HEREBY DESIGNATED AS A

MASTER CERTIFIED HEALTH COACH

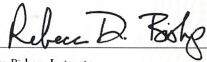
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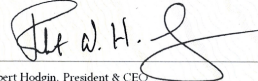
Dominique Hodgkin, Executive Director of Education



William Sears, M.D.



Rebecca Bishop, Instructor



Robert Hodgkin, President & CEO