

My name is Connie Jo Kirk. I'm from Austin, Texas. I was born June 7th, 1948. My family members are civil rights champions. We all are.

I was born at Holy Cross Church down the street on 11th Street. And it was a small wooden church. It also had a kindergarten and lower levels of elementary and they had small rooms in the back of the church where the German nuns delivered all of the babies of color, mainly Mexican and blacks, who predominantly lived in this neighborhood.

This East Austin was wholesome. It was just well integrated with beautiful people.

The blacks and Hispanics had a loving environment. We were united. We had no racial problems between us. None whatsoever. Mothers would share recipes and beautiful foods, and we'd have little decorative parties together in the streets and stuff. And they were really united. The mothers united the neighborhood.

So I was raised first at 1011 Olive Street, over in East Austin, two blocks from I35. My father and mother met at Huston Tillotson college and graduated. Daddy was accepted to two med schools, but before he could go to med school, he was in the Army reserve while he was in college and everything, World War Two started. So he went to World War Two.

My sister was born while he was gone. And when daddy came back, he had a family that he had to look after – and this was during segregation. Blacks didn't have the affordability of coming back and having a wealthy family to support them and their family while they go off to med school and stuff. No, my parents were not rich.

My mother was one of 14 children born in Maine on a farm. She was number 13, she and a twin. They became orphans at the age of 11. Both parents were dead. Back then, there was the problem that many of the black farmers were disappearing or coming up dead and their land was being taken. So my mother's older sisters, the oldest siblings, took the five youngest, and they divided them and raised them.

We had a very loving environment of a lot of my relatives in East Austin. Back then, East Austin was so small we didn't have sections like Chestnut Avenue Association, Rogers Washington Holy Cross neighborhood. We didn't have that. We weren't divided. East Austin was so small that probably there were about almost a thousand families back then.

Okay. And so I'll bring you up into the '50s, law enforcement. We had a line that we couldn't cross, 35 freeway going over to the white section. That's what we call, a lot of blacks had to stay here over this area. You couldn't cross the line, you disappear, you get arrested. When Austin was founded, though originally the neighborhood started in East Austin.

East Austin is the original neighborhood of Austin. And then after a while, after post-slavery and so forth, most of the slaves – who were raised in East Austin, stayed post-slavery. So the whites

didn't want to live among us. They left and East Austin was formed. The neighborhoods were formed by blacks, and very few Hispanics were up here by the end.

But later on, as years went by, they started moving in from Mexico and they, the Hispanics, took over below seventh Street. So we moved to Rogers Washington Holy Cross neighborhood, 1961, on my birthday, in fact.

I was 13 and we had started going to white schools. When we moved over there, we moved in the summer, we had not started school yet, and there was a skating rink that opened up in our neighborhood down the street on Airport and Manor Road.

I don't remember the name of it, but they had a big sign up there. We went to go skating and it said "no blacks allowed." And the reason why I'm bringing up this issue, this is what catapulted our civil rights movement. This just started dominoing and one civil rights march led to another civil rights led.

We had the most peaceful marches. We never had any problems with the police, never. My mother led the marches, she and NAACP President Volma Overton and my dad. And our neighborhood, Rogers Washington Holy Cross, we were the first civil rights leaders in that whole area. That's how mother and all of the mothers in that area, we all got together. We had unity. It was unbelievable.

Then we started when we started going to white schools, my mother got into politics, my parents got into politics. Daddy was in the electoral judge position and all of that. He was the first black employee at the post office, and he was harassed constantly. They did everything they could to try to break my father, and he didn't let them do it.

You'd be amazed how the majority of blacks and Hispanics have faith in Christ. We are very religious bonded people. We believe in religion. Our faith holds us up. We have people who have suffered tremendously at the hands of racism. And, I don't even want to go into the horrors about slavery and how they were treated. But I think that this is one of the things that helped my mother and Senator Gonzalo Barriento and Gus, all of the Mexican leaders and the black leaders.

Because our areas was so small, we couldn't help but run into each other. We shopped at each other's stores. We went to each other's restaurant. I mean, I'm talking about a very loving relationship, of close, real, truthful people.

And they started marching with us in unity. Rogers Washington Holy Cross neighborhood was an exceptional, and still is, an exceptional neighborhood. We were known for going to the city council protesting injustice. Our neighborhood was known, we were the front runners. We led everybody, everybody, all of the greatest leaders came out of that neighborhood.

Doctor John King, President of Huston Tillotson, he was a civil rights leader. And Mister Norman Scales was one of the airmen, black airmen in World War Two. And there were other leaders, school teachers, mostly. Our neighborhood consisted of a lot of school teachers, middle class, so-called blacks. And so we looked out for our own.

We looked out for our own poor. We took care of our own. The Hispanics looked after our own. We didn't have welfare back then to help our people, And welfare, and maybe that never should have started because our people were crippled when welfare moved in. Then came the drugs, then came the crimes, then came penitentiaries. I believe the penitentiary areas are modern day plantations.

I really do. They were created to keep people of color down, to break our spirits, to take away our rights for voting. So that you could not fight injustice. You fight injustice with words, with your mind, not with your fists. We don't accomplish anything with violence. And that's what I was preaching yesterday when I spoke at the state.

And I'm going to preach it everywhere I go, okay. And this is what my mother, my mother used to tell us. You don't argue with people when you want to make a point. This is why our marches were so beautiful. The sheriff department, the mayor, the governor heard about my mother. Everybody came to her. They wanted her endorsements.

Gonzalo Barriento and mother used to call each other cousins. "Hey cos, how you doing cos?" Because they went hand to hand on everything. They supported him, backed each other up to the tee. Mother served on the first grand jury. First black. She led the whole jury on their decisions. Mother saved the Carver Branch Library, our neighborhood, Rogers Washington Holy cross.

They went to the city council and told them that they were not going to tear down our first library. In fact, they made it into a museum and they built a new one, and Gonzalo and them started getting all of their new structures as well in the neighborhood. When people sit down and talk with their heart, when you sit down, rule out all of the other elements of discrimination or racial differences or colors or genders, like in this room, all of us are different races, genders, but all I see all of us united in spirit.

I'm looking at just spirits. I'm looking at your souls. That's what counts with me. We can move forward when we respect one another. I might not agree with what you say. You might not agree with what I say. But that should not stop us from being together and moving forward to understand one another.

All right, so I'm proud to be from that neighborhood. My mother turned out to be the first civil rights champion. And she fought for a lot of changes. And my brother was the first black mayor of Dallas, and he was also the secretary of state.

And then he went to the White House with Obama as US trade ambassador. And, my sister was on the planning commission, and I think she was the first black. But we have numerous historical awards and halls of fame and stuff. I'm honored. In the Hall of Honors at Austin, I sang in the first black opera. I was the first black to perform with the school orchestra because I won state competitions and such, and I gave a private concert for the student body unlike any other. Nobody else.

But when I came back over here, I never had fights with Mexicans. I never had fights with white kids. I worked hard, my mother taught me how to try to unite whites and blacks and people of color together. But when I came back over here, you know who got me? The blacks from the black high schools. I had to fight them physically.

They were mad because they call us white "n's". You know what I'm saying. Because we wanted to push integration. We wanted to push love and peace and out and kindness. We wanted to have unity among the people, but they call us white Uncle Tom's and so forth. Because we went to white schools, we had to put up with more hatred from the black students that went to black schools.

I never had any problems with white kids, never had any problems with Mexicans. In fact, I don't have problems with Mexicans or white kids now. I have adopted over 87 nieces and nephews, and after today I'll add, let me see — eight more. Everybody calls me Auntie Connie. My adopted son is latin. My daughter in law is from Colombia, South America.

My grandbaby is mixed. I have Indians, Africans, Japanese, Taiwanese, Mexicans, Spanish. I have them all different color. And my mother taught us to be that way. And some of the kids in our neighborhood came out with the same learning, to unite, to always respect other races. That's what the main lesson was taught in our neighborhood, Rogers Washington and Holy Cross.

We were family. Everybody knew how old each other was. Everybody knew whose birthday it was. Everyone knew when somebody was sick, if somebody got sick, they all united. In the old days, when somebody passed away in your family, everybody, the women would cook and they would take food over to the bereaved family. They didn't have to cook for at least a week or two, especially during the duration of the funeral preparation they would take food.

They would make sure that the family members looked after. They would help the family, you know, whatever they needed. And knowing the grief, they gave grief support. They prayed for each other. They met in prayer.

They would take the responsibility of picking them up and taking them to the doctor. They didn't have a bus. They didn't have services for handicapped. The neighborhood did everything. Everything. Elderly people too sick to go to the store. Your groceries were delivered to you. We didn't have Dash. We didn't have Uber.

You needed a ride, your car broke down, you needed a ride to work. They'd have one of their kids to take you to work and pick you up. You needed a ride to church. They'd go if you went to the same church, they'd ride together. I mean, I'm talking about unity. I'm talking about unity in a family way. Create a family environment.

In Africa, in the old days, I was in the Peace Corps. I'm an ex Peace Corps volunteer. And I served in the Peace Corps in 76 and South Africa during the apartheid war.

And I had to evacuate from two different countries at war, narrowly. I've been, kidnaped in Africa for three weeks. But I never lost faith. See, we are taught to lean on our faith. Families surround their children with prayer. When people get in trouble, you don't run away. You run to them. We didn't have the support of the white government for us. We had to fight for our own. we had to use our minds.

One of the things is that my mother was a school teacher for 32 years, and most of the school teachers, they all looked out for each other. If they found a family that was suffering, they would use part of their teacher's salary to support that family until they found a way to get their family back on their feet.

If a family didn't have a refrigerator, a stove, or they didn't have a heater or air conditioner, the men would furnish that, would fix it. If they had problems, if they missed their rent or something, mother and her friends or teachers would get together and do a pool and put money in to pay people's rent.

My mother sent so many kids to college with allowances. New clothes paid their tuition. She put them on busses to go to school, out of the state or whatever. They got them on a plane. My mother specifically targeted a lot of the children from the projects. Rosewood project that was torn down, and they're getting ready to put up what condos? And then Booker T. Washington projects are the only ones that are left. But my mother and the teachers, they all – the black teachers in Austin – united to take care of children in poverty.

They wanted to make sure that those children had a way out of poverty.

Rogers Washington Holy Cross, our neighborhood was made of something unlike anywhere else. When our kids went off to college, we made a difference when we went to college. I went to TSU, in Houston, pledged in a sorority, and behind my back, the sorority members that were in the marching band, my Delta sisters, went and entered me into a singing competition because I was the lead singer for my sorority.

I won. It was to perform with the TSU Ocean of Soul marching band of 250 members, and we performed in the Houston Astrodome. We were the first black university to perform in the Astrodome. And guess what I just found out last year? We are featured in the Houston Black

Historical Museum.

Now, myself, my mother and my niece were inducted into the National African-American Women of Achievement Hall of Fame. I'm in the Hall of Honors at Austin High and I'm the first black to win the Austin Chamber of Commerce Artist Award.

When you believe in something, your dream, don't give up. Don't let other people discourage you from moving forward on what you know is right. Stand firm. But what you are doing. I don't care if it's family or boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever. Don't let anyone stop you from following your dream or fighting for something that is just.

Don't hesitate to save someone in trouble, especially a child. Don't worry about it. God's not going to let anything happen to you. Nothing happened to my mother. Many leaders were killed during the time my parents came. Civil rights advocates. Many of them. We never got a death threat.

Isn't that amazing? Gonzalo and them either. None of us. We never got death threats from the whites. None.

We had Mr. Poole in our neighborhood. Our Poole – school teacher. Also a cowboy. He had the prettiest, most beautiful white horse called Playboy. Mr. Poole rode Playboy down Congress Avenue and led in the 4th of July parade. First black cowboy.

Tuskegee airman, Mr. Norman came from our neighborhood. Mr. Poole came from our neighborhood. John King was one of the first black three star generals in the United States, Stewart King's father. We have a lot of historical people. Stella Banks that lived on the corner. She used to sing jazz in Hollywood and wrote music for Duke Ellington and Count Basie, best friends with Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan.

Look these people up. Y'all don't know. You don't know who they are, but they are jazz greats. She helped to found an integrated radio station between black, Hispanic and white radio stations in Hollywood.

Politicians, doctors, lawyers. They came back to visit us. When my father died, it was packed. It was packed. My mother was the first black school teacher at a Mexican school. Did you know that?

And she did so well. They took it out of there and put it in a white school. They loved her over there too. My mama said, "kill people with kindness." I say, "make people run to you than from you."

When you have seen miracles performed, when you've seen victory, great victories accomplished by leaders, when you have witnessed people who said, "we can do it, it can be

done, we can take care of this if we stand together.” What's the old saying of one of the presidents? “United we stand, divided we fall.” That is so true.

And that's not just meant for one race that meant for all of us. I believe in making everybody happy. And when I go out, I want to make somebody smile. When I performed one time in California, and this is one of my toughest at the beginning of my career, I was singing at this club, earning pennies and stuff. And I was singing, and I was talking to the audience, and I hear – I talk to angels all the time.

I keep my channels open, for positive affirmations and optimism. And I heard a voice say, “someone out there needs your help. Someone needs words of comfort.” And I told them, I said, “someone in this room is feeling bad about themselves. They are hopeless. They want to give up on life. Don't do it. Something wonderful is waiting for you. Sometimes when you fall, the only way, the next way up, way out is up.”

So we all fall. You will fall. Those are called lessons. You have to fall. You don't know everything. You have to fall, fall on your butt.

You know, you skating, you riding a bike. You fall off the bike. You know how to get back on the bike and continue. You running, you fall. You get back up. You know how to dodge holes, try to be careful about how you run. Whatever you do, you're going to fall. But don't let that make you check out.

After I finished the show, this young man walked up to me and gave me \$100 and I was doing bad financially. He told me that he was on his way to the Golden Gate Bridge to commit suicide that night. And he heard my voice singing, and I lured him in, and he heard what I had to say, and I changed his mind. The next year, he was married, making a fortune and doing well.

I've seen people's homes burned down from a stove and the window was open, and the wind came in through the window and blew the fire across the carpet, burning all of the Christmas gifts two days before for their five children. The whole house went up in flames in 30 minutes. And they live with me because of my mama teaching me how to share my life. My mother's motto is, “if you have something you can share.”

I learned this from the neighborhood, Rogers Washington Holy Cross. I was raised to think that way. I hope I didn't bore you.

That neighborhood is like a giant door that stays open. It stays open for young people like yourself, who need to go in there and reap the benefits of the knowledge and the beautiful work that the leaders, the old leaders, left behind. It's still there.

Anything you want to learn is still there. They made sure that they left behind all of the trails of their work in the library, through the memories of people like Jan and her sweet family and her

friends, and Brenda Malik and her family.

And they're still people there. Ida Dawne Thompson, who lived next door to our family, her father – Oscar Thompson – was the first black biology instructor at University of Texas, and he didn't even have a Master's at the time, I think he got it later. But there's so many of us, children, some of the grandchildren, and even it doesn't necessarily have to be carried on by the grandchildren. It just needs to be there in memory of the old leaders and what they stood for.

Take that and run. You need to live on their courage. You need to understand that they weren't afraid when they marched, when they took on a great battle of racial discrimination and segregation, they weren't afraid.

They moved in faith. And see, that's the problem. So many people nowadays are moving around without faith. That's why they fail. And the people. Oh, God, the rate of suicide is ridiculous. And, so many marriages, people don't know how to fall in love. They don't know how to be patient. They don't know that there is somebody out there for everybody.

You don't go looking when you go pick, and then your man is going to pick the wrong person. You know, you have to sit down and think wisely, carefully about every move that you're going to make. When you step out the door. But the main thing where you won't fail is that you have to be optimistic that there's a better day ahead, that the sun is still shining behind dark clouds, that you have to understand that you're not alone.

You're not the only person who's suffering. You're not the only person who's in misery. You're not the only person who fail or have problems or losing. But it's going to be somebody there to help you. You know, if you learn to love, then you will exude love from you. You have to spread a white light. You have to spread a light around you.

You have to let people see you glowing. And when they see you glowing, your glow is like a magnet. It'll pull people to you. I made about five friends this week. I mean, I make so many friends I have to turn them down. I can't go to HEB without – I call HEB a community center – I can't go there without seeing a pretty baby, and I smile and laugh. And then next thing I know I'm talking to this old lady and telling her how pretty her hair is. If you're going to say something to people, be kind, say something really nice, but don't butter them up with bull crap. Say it's the truth.

You have a pretty smile. That's the truth. I'm not lying. I'm not buttering you up. I'm not kissing your butt. I'm telling you that you really have a pretty smile. When people hear something that's looked inside of them, when other people see the good in them, their best quality, it makes them feel good. It makes them feel like they're worthy. It makes them feel like that, "maybe, maybe I got something going and I don't know it. Maybe I need to stay on that path."

Most people don't know, they're not led, you're not born with knowledge. You have to be taught

same way with racism. All these young kids, they have to be taught. They have to be taught to hate. You have to be taught to love. I'll tell you about one experience I had at Austin High.

I was in a tennis class and I had a wonderful white teacher who wanted to integrate all of us. So she made the Mexican pair with a black or with a white, and did the same with a black, with a white, with a Mexican.

Well, I got this young girl partner, [named Cathy], white girl, and we were the best in the class because I was also athletic. I ran track for 12 years. I know I don't look like it right now, but I'm gonna get back to it later. Anyhow, we went there and we won. And we had a ball and she would just hug me, and she'd be so excited. And then I sang. And I was popular at Austin High. And this girl and I were the best of friends. We go to class. We couldn't wait to see each other.

They had a Wyatt's cafeteria at Hancock Center before it was taken down. My mother now would go shopping and we would go eat at a Wyatt's, which was like a Luby's. Afterwards, we standing at the front waiting on the host to show us the table, and I saw Cathy and her family. It was a long table of her family.

And I said, "mama, mama, look, there's Cathy, there's my friend Cathy!" I say, "there she is over there!" And Cathy saw me and she said, "..."

And I said, "well, I guess she can't see me." My mother said, my mother took my hand and gently put my hand down. She says, "she saw you, baby."

As God would have it, the host was leading us to the table, and they happened to pass by Cathy's table. I want to make sure that I saw what I saw. So when I got over close enough to her, I said, "hi Cathy."

And her family all looked at me very mean. And they looked at her and I heard one of them say, "you know her?"

I went and sat at the table and I had gotten my food. I ended up having to get my food to go because I kept crying in it. I was the kind of person that once, you deceived me or betrayed me – I had the heart of a child – I was done. Then Monday came. Well then, here come Cathy, running in.

And I said, "mm mm". I didn't say a word.

I went to the teacher. I told her what happened. I said, please, I need another partner, preferably Hispanic.

In learning, in my Christian belief, God teaches us to forgive. My heart was too young. I didn't know the Lord well enough, though I had been going to church all of my life. You have to have

an experience. You have to have experience to love God. You have to know him for real. You have to see and feel him and believe.

You have to see a miracle. You have to really understand the Bible. It's a lot that people don't understand. You have to know how to pray. A lot of people don't know how to pray either, so I didn't have the ability to forgive her. And I was brokenhearted all the rest of that year that affected me because of the way she treated me.

Then all of the other white kids that have been loving on me and being so sweet and kind, that had a domino effect that made me wonder, well, if I saw them out somewhere, would they do the same to me? So we have to make a change. They have to make a change. I couldn't blame her. She was a child and I didn't know that.

So we need to work on these kids early. On that note, [blows kiss].