

Melinda Pierson's Story

Melinda's maternal grandmother came to San Francisco from Missouri with her sister to look for work and a better life. She found regular employment and eventually moved into Westpoint housing project. Her grandparents divorced in the 1960s and her grandmother became a single mom to four children. She worked hard to provide for them, keep them housed. Her ex-husband provided some financial help and came around sometimes, yet he had another family which became his priority.

Melinda's paternal grandmother came to California from Louisiana as a young girl. She had her leg amputated at age sixteen. She became an Licensed Practical Nurse and worked throughout her life, until she was forced to retire early due to health issues. She had three children and is still living in California.

Melinda feels that her maternal grandmother got the "better life" she was looking for, but was afraid to take advantage of some of the opportunities she had early on. At the same time, formal and informal restrictions of where African-Americans could buy property limited her options. Grandmother still lives in Westpoint and is committed to the neighborhood.

Mom was raised in Bayview and was seventeen years old when Melinda was born. Melinda's dad was her neighbor and was twenty-one at the time. He had grown up without a father. Her dad worked in construction, but also chased "fast money" and spent some time in jail.

Bayview was a very different place before crack – more of a family environment. It was safe to play outside. After crack, adults stopped caring about kids. "Growing up in a place like that, there is no hope." It's easy, she says, to "get wrapped up in a lot of mess."

Melinda's mother and father doted on her. She was the only child of both her parents. Melinda's dad called her the "Queen of '73". Her mother especially sheltered her from the dangers of the neighborhood and her home always felt safe. Her parents did not do drugs but many of her family members were in the fast lane. Yet, they always had a strong sense of family.

Even though she was a young single mom, Melinda's mother was mature, and "put everything on hold to be a good mother to me." They went on excursions to Sausalito and other places, had good conversations, and spent a lot of quality time together. Her mother really paid attention to Melinda and wanted to be involved in her life. She also wanted to always keep track of Melinda and make sure she was not falling into the "mess" that was so prevalent in Bayview. When Melinda was a teenager, this attention felt intrusive, but looking back now, she values it and knows it was an expression of love.

Growing up in this environment shaped her into a strong person with self-esteem. Her mother raised her to be independent and proud of her heritage.

Melinda's mom married when Melinda was eleven and had another daughter when Melinda was thirteen. Her mother worked as a certified nursing assistant and at various other jobs, except for a time when Melinda's sister was young. Her mom eventually moved out of SF. In 2002 she purchased a home in Sacramento – the first person in her immediate family to purchase a home.

Melinda frequently attended church with her grandmother and believes that the church can provide a strong foundation for making good choices. "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6). During the years of the crack epidemic, fewer kids went to church, again because parents and adults were not interested in their welfare.

As a teenager, Melinda spent time hanging out with her friends, singing, joking: the usual teenage behavior; she was not into drugs. The boys in her neighborhood acted tough, but they were friends who loved each other. During her teenage years, Melinda's mother was "just trying to hold on to me", not necessarily focused on Melinda doing well in school but in staying out of the worst trouble.

During and after high school, Melinda helped her mother take care of her sister (her stepfather died during this time). Melinda really invested a lot of hope in her younger sister. She helped her get through high school and into college.

Melinda herself is finishing a degree in communication studies at San Francisco State University. Since she will finish before her younger sister, Melinda will be the first person in her family to receive a college degree.

After high school, Melinda started training to be a certified nursing assistant, but she didn't like it. Eventually she was trained as a phlebotomist and served the community for nine years. During this time, she moved to Atlanta, "I wanted to see if I could live on my own." The culture shock was **intense**: the city was "so very segregated. I couldn't wait to go home, I knew I couldn't stay there." In San Francisco "you can go anywhere, sit down and eat a meal and connect with people."

Melinda has found her path in helping the African-American community be and stay healthy. "I had a teacher in a high school health class. She was in a difficult, inner-city school, but she genuinely cared about her students and her subject. She brought in someone who had HIV, to talk to us about his experience of being rejected by his family. That story made us all cry. But it sparked in me the desire to do something about it. It took me awhile but I am now actively doing something to help my community be healthy."

She does public speaking engagements on self-esteem, HIV/AIDS awareness, and women's issues. She feels that the African-American community's repose to HIV/AIDS is "sad". "The stigma about HIV in the African-American community is terrible, it's killing us." Keeping people safe from HIV/AIDS is about building self-esteem – "only people who have self esteem can set boundaries and keep them." Some people will hear the message and not accept it; some won't hear it at all; and some will hear it or remember it just at the time they are ready to receive it and act on it.

"The mistake that we make is thinking we have to change the world; we can change just one person."

Melinda feels that the election of President Obama has opened a new chapter. Many older African-Americans "didn't seem to believe it was possible" for Obama to be elected. Melinda admires Michelle Obama as a beautiful, strong, African-American woman. Achievement of the goal of the presidency "is not a given for an African-American person, it's just not." "I really want African-Americans to see *family* role models [like the Obamas]; we have lost that sense of nuclear family. I want to have a family to raise children in."

“It’s not an option for me to stop or quit. All of what I do is for my sister and other younger African-Americans, to be a role model for them, and ultimately for them to be *better* than me. I believe this is what my grandmothers wanted for us when they made that long trip to an unknown way of life. We owe it to those who struggled before us to be persistent in our struggle for *true* equality.”

“San Francisco is where my life began and though I’ve traveled to twenty-nine states and even out of the country, I have yet to find another city that feels as free and inclusive as San Francisco. My city has issues, of course, but there is a great hope inside me that one day the majority of African-American residents here can feel and know the wonders of the city that we live in.”

Melinda has two brothers. One is her biological brother, Gregory Pierson, age fourteen, her father’s son. The other is her father’s adopted son, Mario Pierson, who is thirty-six and shares her last name. Melinda and Mario have been together their entire lives and lived in Atlanta together and now he is married with children there.

Melinda wishes to mention her mother and her father and her sister, Shirley Williams, Gregory Pierson, Sr., and Erica Williams, for her success is their success and she is as proud of them as they are of her. She also wishes to mention her paternal grandmother Louise Mcvea and maternal grandmother Mae Jackson, with love. They were always there for her.