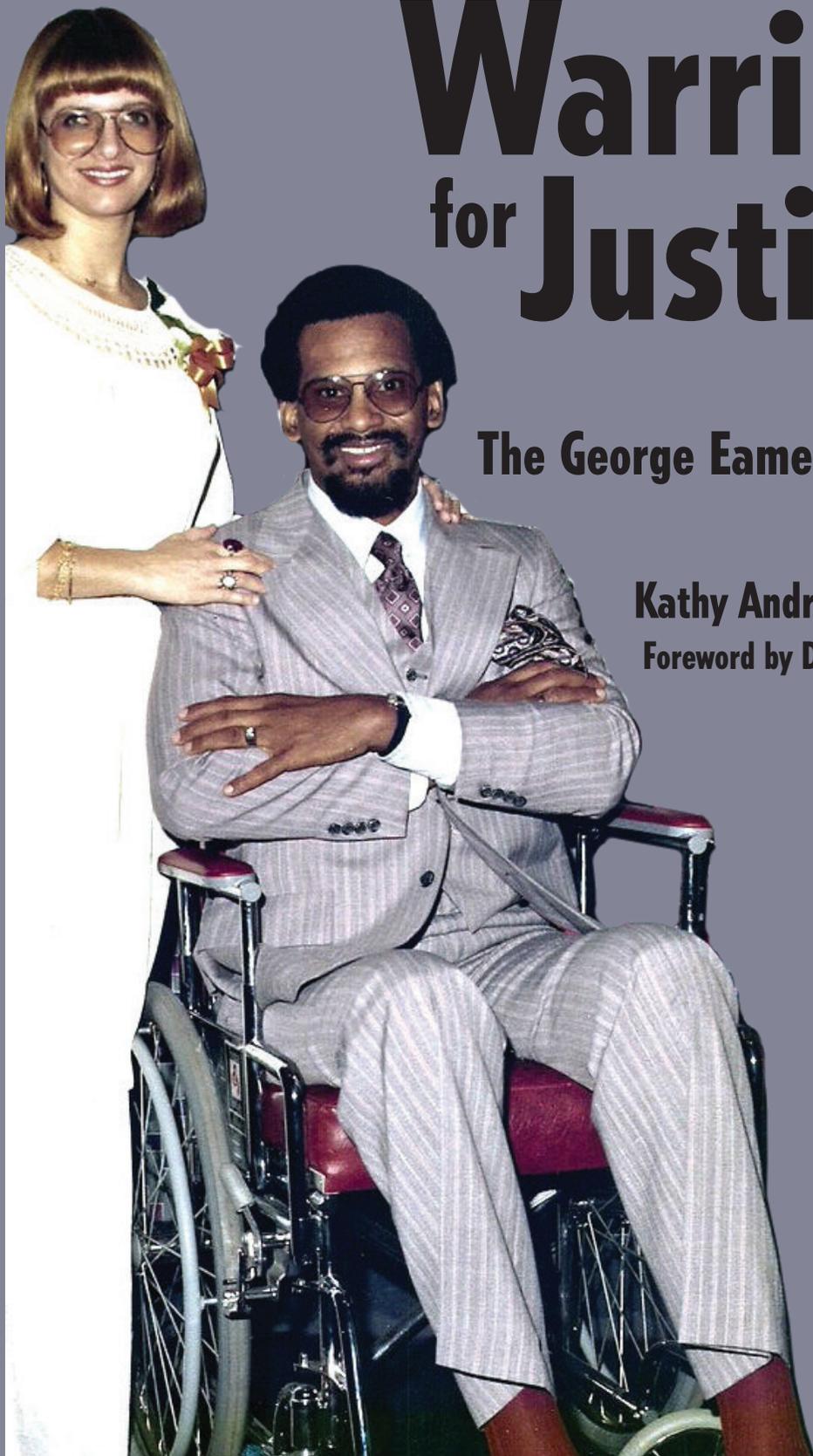


Warrior for Justice

The George Eames Story

Kathy Andre-Eames

Foreword by Dale Brown



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“[George] Eames was ornery, stubborn, controversial, opinionated, and bossy but also honest, fearless, tenacious, loyal, and fully committed that all humans should be treated fairly.”

—from the foreword by Dale Brown

An educated, white, Catholic woman, Kathy Andre-Eames fell in love with and married a black paraplegic in the early 1970s. Her husband, George Washington Eames, Jr., was an activist for civil rights and racial equality. Andre-Eames draws the reader into their history—one that was both controversial and dangerous.

In 1956, Eames was unjustly shot in the back for being in a white neighborhood. This experience motivated his work for civil rights, and from the 1960s until the beginning of the twenty-first century, Eames fought for change. Although he was injured more than forty years ago, instances of this type of violence and hatred still litter the news today.

Over the course of his life, Eames worked with the Baton Rouge branch of the NAACP and within the system to desegregate local and government-run institutions, including Louisiana State University. He investigated and resolved issues of violence against unarmed blacks and instances of discrimination against people of color.

A firm supporter of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Eames also worked to force universities, public areas, and other facilities to comply with ADA standards. In relating her husband's life story and her part in it, Andre-Eames not only pays homage to his memory but also continues to serve as his fellow advocate for justice.

Warrior **for Justice**

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To Almighty God, who is Justice, Mercy, and Love

To my husband, George, my warrior—for the miraculous journey we shared.

May your words always be remembered:

“You can’t stop progress; you can only detain it.”

“Be accountable for your space.”

“Evil flourishes where good men do nothing.” [Edmund Burke]

“You can’t do nothing scared.”

“The Revolution never sleeps.”

“Freedom is non-negotiable.”

“I’ll take on anybody, anyplace, any time.”



George Eames

“When you’re up to your eyeballs
in muck and bullets, do muck; then do bullets.”

—Stuart Wilde

“The Revolution never sleeps.”

—G. Washington Eames

“And before I’ll be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave
And go home to my God
And be free.”

—Old Negro spiritual, anonymous

“Now cracks a noble heart—Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

—*Hamlet*, William Shakespeare

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Foreword

How does one begin to describe George Eames? Probably the best way was my first contact with him. I was walking off our home court after a loss in 1973 and I heard a voice shouting at me, “Hey Coach Brown, better get yourself some brothers on your team.” I immediately went over to him, face to face, and told him, “Listen buddy, I am doing my best to recruit the best players I can and color has nothing to do with it, so wise up.”

The next day my secretary called and told me the president of the Baton Rouge NAACP was on the phone asking to talk to me. I thought that loud mouth last night called the NAACP to report my conversation with him. I aggressively answered the phone and heard, “Hey, man, this is George Eames and I like your style.”

I said, “Do I know you?”

And he said, “I’m the guy you got so mad at last night at the game and I would like to help you if I can.”

Our first meeting went well and I could tell he was sincere. From then it was clear to me that he was very outspoken, committed, abrasive in some ways, and fearless. From that day on, he did his very best to let black players know they would be treated with fairness and dignity if they came to LSU.

It was interesting that an equal number of blacks, like whites, did not like George, probably because he was far from smooth. He was brutally blunt, highly opinionated, and demanding. However, he was also a true warrior for justice and never tried to impress anyone—but only spoke what he really believed in his heart.

If you met him only one time, you probably would not like him, but if you knew him like I did, you would then see that he gave his entire life to fighting any form of injustice for anyone.

George Eames was ornery, stubborn, controversial, opinionated,

and bossy; but also honest, fearless, tenacious, loyal, truthful, and fully committed that all humans should be treated fairly.

There might be some who wonder why I would write the forward to this book, on this controversial man's life. My answer would come through a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said, "Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause."

—Dale Brown
LSU Basketball 1972-97

Chapter 1

Growing Up with Racism

Approaching seventy years of age, I have one dream, one cause, one delight: to serve the will of God. I have lived by this teaching my whole life and tried to hold nothing back. As I prayed about the movie that George's great-nephew, Cleveland Bailey, Sr. wanted to create about my life with George, I determined that I would not hold back anything of my story, except some minor details that might be embarrassing to family or close friends. I entered more deeply into prayer, only then opening my scriptures and found one of my favorites, Psalm 40:

Here I am;
Your commands for me are written in the scroll.
To do your will is my delight;
My God, your law is in my heart!
I announced your deed to a great assembly;
I did not restrain my lips;
You, Lord, are my witness.
Your deed I did not hide within my heart;
Your loyal deliverance I have proclaimed.
I made no secret of your enduring kindness
To a great assembly.¹

I believe with all my heart—nothing that happens to us in our lives is an accident. Nothing is a coincidence. God's hand is in every tiny detail. He does not create our suffering, but He permits it. Out of evil, He works only goodness. Only He can see the final result. He delivers us. With enduring kindness, He helps us to work out the complex, beautiful patterns of our lives. One day, for all of us, what was done in darkness will come into the light. If not now, then in eternity.

Born in 1946, I was a child of racist times in the South. I was named Theresa Kathleen Andre in a hospital in New Roads, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana.

My parents, Roy and Emily, were living with my father's parents at that time. My father's relatives were proud that they were Cajuns and that my great-great-grandfather was the first citizen of the parish to volunteer for the Confederate Army. My godmother and Daddy's youngest sister, Doris, showed me a ring that he or another relative carved from a button while in a Yankee prison!

My mother's father, Achille Altazan, was a barrel maker or a cooper like his father. Leaving school in the second grade, he taught himself to read and write. He loved playing the violin and writing stories.

My maternal grandmother was a teacher; my grandfather's mother was a midwife who nursed local folk during the yellow fever epidemic that scourged Baton Rouge and Louisiana for decades before 1905. My grandfather remembered his mother, "Mon," stripping down in the yard, bathing, and boiling her clothes there to avoid bringing the dread fever into her home.

I grew up in a little town in West Baton Rouge Parish, Brusly, LA. Unlike my old Confederate ancestors, I would be just as proud to break the color barrier as they were proud to enforce it!

My consciousness of the color barrier emerged during my childhood and early teen years; several incidents then partially shaped who I am today. Some early memories were of my grandparents.

In Erwinville at the home of my paternal grandfather, Harry (whom we called "Papa") folks used to sit on the front porch, the "gallery," which ran across the front of the house. Here I heard many stories. Papa told everyone sitting on the front porch, "All niggers steal."

Papa had hired a domestic to help Po Mom, my grandmother Olea, with household tasks. My grandfather was a farmer, so cooking had to be done for all the children and field hands. The family alone consisted of ten children, eight children born to Papa and Po Mom plus Po Mom's two young siblings who were orphaned when Po Mom's father killed himself. I think the servant's name was Millie. Papa described how he caught Millie stealing rice, "She had a little hole in her apron pocket, and she left a trail of rice as she moved around the kitchen."

After driving or walking down the lane, visitors usually climbed the



The author at ten years old, fifth grade

steps to sit in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch. Uncle Bill, who still lived on the place, was a frequent visitor. As a young child I knew him—he was already advancing in years. He loved all the grandchildren because, as one of Papa's black hired hands, he

had seen all the children of the family grow up and had worked with them as youngsters. Whenever Uncle Bill walked down the lane to visit, I noticed that he never walked onto the gallery; he always sat on the steps, even though rocking chairs stood empty on the porch. I also noticed how he called everyone “Mister.” Mr. Harry, Mr. Roy, Mr. Earl. He even called me Miss Kathy. I thought that was funny—after all, I was just a little girl! His wife was Aunt Hess. Nobody ever called him Mr. Bill. My brother and I knew him as Uncle Bill, but I knew if I had called him Mr. Bill, my father would have corrected me.

When I was nine or ten years old, in 1955 or ‘56, my father walked into the kitchen in our little house in Brusly. Slapping some leaflets down on the table, he told my mother that he would be going to his Southern Gentlemen meeting that night.

J. B. Easterly in Baton Rouge started this segregationist organization in April 1955, and another branch sprang up in Lakeland, Louisiana (Pointe Coupee Parish, where my father was born and grew up), in Oct. 1955. Over the years I remembered that name, Southern Gentlemen, and wondered if it might be a euphemism for the Ku Klux Klan. But no, this was the Klan minus the hoods and violence. No less dedicated to the preservation of the status quo of segregation in Louisiana, the Southern Gentlemen, a semi-secret group, vowed to use legal means. Closely affiliated with the White Citizens’ Councils of Mississippi, they were just as vocal.²

In the *Times News* of Hendersonville, North Carolina, on Oct. 25, 1955, one newsman explained that the Southern Gentlemen declared Baton Rouge “off limits” to returning black veterans. The organization predicted that Baton Rouge would be “overrun” by 140,000 returning Negro veterans who were scheduled to participate in Operation Sagebrush, a series of post-World War II maneuvers at Fort Polk, LA. They feared that these soldiers would “pour into our beautiful capital city.”³

Then on June 26, 1956, J. B. Easterly told a cheering crowd from the state capital steps where they were holding a rally, “We want to go on living our own sinful way. We don’t want to go to heaven because our mamas and papas are down below. We want to do this in a peaceful way, but we are going to stay segregated in Louisiana—come hell or high water.”⁴

George Eames would tell me later that he was mustered into the US Army in April 1953. Upon his honorable discharge in June 1955 and his return to Baton Rouge, he was trying to decide what to do with his life.

Tragedy would strike. One fateful night in March 1956 George was on his way home from either work or night school at Spaulding Business College. Suddenly, a white businessman—fearing that George was a “Peeping Tom”—shot him. The climate in Baton Rouge at that time created many potentials for violence.

The shooter was Alvin B. Cole of 187 W. Garfield. He and his wife had had a bad experience with a young black man about a week or two before that fateful night of the shooting. A black stranger had exposed himself to her, the Coles said; the police were called, but no one had been apprehended. Due to this incident, they were on edge and defensive.

George was passing by their home on adjoining property that had long been used by the public as a shortcut through the block. Cole told the police that they believed the same man had come back; Cole insisted that the police refer to their own records, citing this as the reason for his use of his weapon.

Cole was never arrested.

Neither was George.

Assistant DA, Scallan Walsh wrote a letter to the Veterans Administration, explaining that “...this office has never been convinced that the injuries sustained by George W. Eames, Jr. resulted from his own willful misconduct. This accused was found shot and in a paralyzed position some eight or ten feet from the premises of Mr. Cole on a portion of the property used by the general public as a means of ingress and egress....for the above reasons no charges have ever been filed against George W. Eames, Jr., and none will be filed by this office.”⁵

Though this letter exonerating George clearly reached the Veterans Administration, they still denied him veterans benefits. Their refusal consigned him to live in dire poverty for some years following his release from the hospital.

Despite constant requests from his mother, Alsie Eames, on

George's behalf, neither one of them received anything other than denials from the Veterans Administration.

We did not even know about the DA's letter for many years. It was not until Milton Altazan, my mother's brother, who worked for the VA at the old state capitol building, opened George's file. I believe it was in the 1980s that he sent us a copy.

This information was precious to both of us. The shooting and subsequent news articles had effectively destroyed George's good name and reputation. The so-called "news" even followed him to the hospital as he fought for his life; other patients sometimes referred to him as the "Peeping Tom." His reputation in Baton Rouge when he was released from the hospital was no better. George had to live and work under these circumstances for the rest of his life. He would fight to prove that his character was not reprehensible. It was an uphill battle taking years.

During his three-year stay in the VA hospital with no income, he always had money in his pocket. George told me that he "hustled" to make pocket money, mostly by betting on sports events. He baited racist white patients to make extravagant bets on games or even particular plays in a game, such as the outcome of a turn at bat, while he made conservative bets.

Only twenty-three years old and ever fun-loving, he amused himself with mischievous pranks. For example, rolling about the hospital on a gurney that he propelled along by pushing sticks, he would cover himself with a sheet and wheel into a corridor like a corpse rolling along by itself. Or he would take a rolling leap to the back of an elevator, running into the back wall. His head was a mere two inches from the edge of the gurney, but other passengers didn't know this and they squealed in fright that he might be injured.

His compassion often overtook his foolishness, however, as he usually spent mealtimes feeding other veterans who could not feed themselves. Prejudiced nurses occasionally neglected the black veterans. Sometimes when he saw a patient in distress, he called attention to the nurses who were lollygagging, "These people need help!" he said. Doctors would sometimes ask him to talk to other veterans, who, depressed at being in the hospital a couple of months, would be encouraged by George's cheerfulness after his own stay of two years, or more.

When he left the VA Hospital in New Orleans, his favorite nurse, a white lady, told him “Junior, I know you would like to go back to Baton Rouge and avenge yourself on that white man who shot you. But what you ought to do is to make sure that an incident like this never happens again to any other young black man.” This path George deliberately chose. He wanted justice for his people, so he put the shooting behind him and moved forward.

Despite all he went through, I never saw any evidence of bitterness or hatred against white people. He hated prejudice, not individual people. His attitude and values were more than acceptable to me.

George had begun work to desegregate the school system before he was shot. The original lawsuit against East Baton Rouge Parish to desegregate the school system had been filed Feb. 29, 1956. On June 13, 1956 (after George was shot), depositions of the plaintiffs were filed, including George’s deposition, taken before he had been shot.

The Louisiana Legislature passed additional Jim Crow laws in 1956, among them the Recreation Statute prohibiting any mixing of the races in athletic “training, games, sports or contests,” dancing or social events (a law which would adversely affect LSU and the Sugar Bowl).

The Public Carrier Statute segregated buses.

The Employment Statute demanded separate restroom facilities, separate eating places and even separate eating and drinking utensils!

The Public Accommodations Statute separated all public parks, recreation centers, and playgrounds.

In 1957: “All public schools to be racially segregated.”⁶

What a sweet irony that George would see these prohibitions overturned later, as we worked in the seventies and eighties to desegregate the school system and the athletic program at LSU.

Discovering Race in My Childhood

I was about ten in 1955 or 1956, when the locals were hotly contesting these rousing racial issues. My family lived in Brusly. One day a black man walked about three miles to our home to ask

my father for help. He lived in a rundown shack on Cinclare Sugar Plantation. It was Christmas time, his wife was sick, and he had no money. My father gave him a few dollars to buy medicine; when the man left, my father told me, my brother, and my mother, "I want you to gather some things together for this man's Christmas. Kathy and R. J., you find some toys for his children; Emily, see if you have a couple of dresses and a purse for his wife, and I'll give him a couple of shirts and some khakis as well as some meat from the freezer and some fig preserves." What we gathered filled a number three tub. I gave a doll.

My seven-year-old brother and I were excited because Daddy was letting us go with him to deliver the gifts. When we entered the man's home, I was stunned. The house was heated by a wood-burning fireplace of dilapidated brick; newspapers plastered every inch of the walls in an attempt to keep cold from coming through the cracks. The man's wife was covered up to her neck in the bed that was in the small living room, and two young children cowered behind their father's legs. I handed my doll to the little girl, and her father picked it up to look at it more closely. "Ain't a thing wrong with it! Ain't broken or messed up or nothing!" the man marveled. I realized, even at my young age, that he was shocked that white people would give him or his child anything that was not broken or unspoiled. His attitude humbled me, affecting me profoundly.

At about the same age, I missed the bus at school one day and decided to walk home, a long distance of about four miles for a little girl. You have to understand the unique way our community is laid out, even today, as far as I know. The homes in unincorporated Back Brusly, where my family lived, were not segregated. Leaving "Front Brusly," the incorporated township where the school is located, I crossed the highway into Back Brusly.

Walking along the road skirting sugar cane fields, I found several white homes, then a black one or two, then a couple of white ones, and so on. Not that these people ever socialized together. No, but they were neighbors and let one another be. Children didn't play together as far as I know. Yet as I walked down that blacktop road, tiring more by the minute, I came upon a large Cajun-style house, unpainted, and set far from the road where I knew black people lived. My father had instructed my brother and me that these were

unsavory characters, that the women there had lots of babies with different men.

I saw a little girl in the driveway about my age, and I made up my mind I was going to talk to her, so I said hello. "What's your name?" I asked.

I have no idea what she said. I had the hardest time understanding what seemed to be a name I had never heard in my life, "Louvinnie" or some such.

"What school do you go to?" I asked next.

"Lukeville," was plain enough. I knew it was the local colored elementary school.

"What did y'all do for May Day?" Now I hoped for real information; my own school had done some decorating and planned activities with the children.

"...the maypole," she responded.

Astounded, I could understand only "the maypole." Here I was, being brave to talk to this child from a dangerous family, and despite my best efforts, I understood not one word. She spoke a totally different language. Her dialect was so thick that it created a barrier between us. I walked on, thinking that this communication would be much more challenging than I had ever dreamed.

Another incident in my childhood gave me early insight into race relations. About nine or ten years old, I was in the family car on the ferry, which carried people and vehicles back and forth between Port Allen and Baton Rouge across the Mississippi.

On the Baton Rouge side, we suddenly heard a scream. We could see from the car a black man stabbing a black woman in the chest with a long-bladed knife. They were a few yards from us where passengers were boarding.

A few seconds later my father was stepping out of the car, muttering to himself, "I need a pipe or something...I can't believe all these men are just going to stand around and see this woman be killed!"

My mother was pleading, "No, honey, no..."

Daddy was going to rescue the colored woman! Because I didn't want Daddy to be stabbed, I began to plead with him, too. I was excited, frightened, and proud of my father. Daddy never totally exited the car because someone had called the police who had quickly responded.

I never believed that Daddy hated black people. I remember that one of his brothers, Elmo, a deputy in Port Allen, had been shot in the stomach by a black man. Another uncle on Mama's side of the family—George Bourg, also a Port Allen deputy—had been stabbed while trying to make an arrest. Many of my family worked in law enforcement and had seen some of the worst sides of the black community. That kind of experience, distrust of blacks, was difficult for them to overcome.

Understand this: my family and my parents, especially, were God-fearing people, good Catholics. I was raised to be obedient to God and man. I participated in Mass every Sunday, learned my catechism, read spiritual books like the life of St. Theresa of Lisieux, and prayed daily.

Both my mother's and father's families were hard-working, honest, plain folk who treasured their families, their homes, and their honor. Our entire social life revolved around family and family occasions. Believing in honesty and fair dealing, my father often said that a man's word was his bond. Utterly committed, faithful, and charitable, Mama was a prayerful person. It seemed to me they were the salt of the earth. Both of them were affectionate disciplinarians to my brother and to me.

As a little girl, I adored my father. I saw no wrong in him or in Mama. They both encouraged me in school and taught me to work in the yard and in the home. Living in the country, we raised much of our own food, milked cows, slaughtered our own chickens and beef, canned vegetables and fruit. We dressed simply, and enjoyed few luxuries. While doing all this work at home, Daddy worked at a plant in Baton Rouge, first as a pipe-fitter and later entering management as a supervisor. He loved pipe-fitting but knew management would give him a more secure income for his family. I don't know how he did it.

We lived frugally. I remember going to about one or two movies a year in Baton Rouge. They were available, but we just did not go. Having lived through the Depression, my parents saved. I received a twenty-five cent allowance each week, all of which I placed in the collection basket in church each Sunday.

When Daddy put in a garden, he set aside a little section for me and my brother. We planted what we wanted. I remember pulling little carrots from the ground in my part of the garden, washing them off in the yard, and eating them outside. We hoed and pulled weeds,

raking leaves in the fall. During pecan season, we picked pecans, stowed them in sacks, and earned our own money by selling them to the pecan man when he drove by in his ragged old truck. Once, my brother and I helped Uncle Harry in Erwinville pick cotton for an entire day. I dragged my sack along for hours. We were paid by the pound, and I could later appreciate what it meant to pick cotton, my back aching, being hot, sweaty, and itchy and pricking my tender fingers on the dried cotton husks. I helped Mama to pluck chickens, to can fruits and vegetables, and to clean the house. I raised my own calf on a bottle; my brother and I acquired numerous pets, including a miniature Shetland pony, horse, lamb, goat, rabbits, and the like. Dogs were ever present, and a couple of cats.

Daddy was hurt badly in the fall of 1956, I believe. A drunk driver collided with my father in a terrible automobile accident; Daddy remained in the hospital for a week or maybe a month. Our Uncle Gerald (Mama's younger brother) and Aunt Rosalie moved to our home for the duration to care for R. J. and me as well as for all the animals. Having helped my uncle feed the chickens, as little as I was, I still climbed into the barn to drag bales of hay to the door to feed Daddy's cows. I broke the bales apart, and scattered them about for the cattle to eat.

In the fifth grade I entered a contest sponsored by the local newspaper and won a bicycle. My brother also had a bicycle; we always played with toys of all kinds and sporting equipment. After Daddy set up a basketball goal in the yard, we played basketball as well as softball, football and badminton. I broke my wrist when I was twelve while scrambling for a ball.

Active and strong, a good student making As and Bs, I was a confident child, mature for my age, and considerate of others, as my parents taught me to be. They were proud of me, and I was proud of myself. Through all the years of my childhood, I never experienced any kind of conflict except the normal arguments with my brother. I saw little conflict between my parents.

I was a sweet, obedient little girl for the most part. I earnestly strove to be the best I could be in everything.

Naturally, I wanted to be holy too, like St. Theresa. I felt close to God. When my grandfather asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told him, "Either a teacher or a nurse or maybe a nun."

In recent years, I remembered an incident which occurred when I was twelve, in 1958. It remained a vivid image in my mind—it reveals my tenacious grasp of justice as a child. I wrote about it in essay form:

With Truth and Justice for All

Could I really have been the good, sweet child that I think I was? Even Mama would confirm it. She remembers me the same way that I do. Except for minor infractions once in a while for which she usually swatted me with a wet dishrag, few incidents called for major steps from her or my father. Probably for this reason, these ancient occasions for which I was chastised stand out clearly in my memory, fully detailed pictures complete with gestures, faces, and words. Their tiny details rear up certain and sharp, although I normally have a terrible memory for events that happened as recently as two or three days ago.

When I was twelve, for example, my mother's sister and her five boys were visiting from Texas. On these annual visits, my brother inevitably stuck with Jamie, one year my junior, and the other boy cousins, whoever were old enough to play with them. I clung closely to my Aunt Faye and Mama, the women folks who huddled over coffee in the kitchen. As they clucked along, I clucked with them, or at least listened, hanging over the sugar bowl absorbing their woman talk. A bonus was Aunt Faye's baby boy—one of them had been born just months ago—each time she visited, it seemed to me. Since Mama had no babies, I loved to cuddle and carry Craig, then Kevin, Christopher, and finally Mark. Christopher probably was the one toddling about when I suffered my first injustice.

My brother and my cousins had been pestering the heck out of me on this visit. All of them were obnoxious, dumb boys of eleven, nine, eight, and such; and all of them were equally dedicated to the exquisite torture of sensitive girls of twelve.

I had taken all I would take from these fools. I hauled off and socked my brother. Naturally, Mama had not seen a single picky thing the boys had done to me, so when she saw me strike R. J., she yelled at me.

We were in the living room. I stood in front of that old green vinyl chair to the left of the black and white television. The plastic curtains blew gently at the window from the attic fan. I stood like a rock. Mama

repeated her command: "Get on your knees, Kathy. Come on; get on your knees right there. Now."

The punishment itself gave me no trouble. I had been forced to my knees when I was four, five, or six. But not in front of my aunt. Aunt Faye was the one I drank coffee with and whose babies I lugged around.

I was embarrassed and felt righteous, refusing to obey. I held my head high. I didn't yell or cry or fuss, but I made it plain that I would not do what Mama commanded.

"No," I insisted. "I didn't do anything wrong." I felt like a martyr. One in front of a firing squad. One being stoned by an angry mob. Or a poor innocent girl thrown to the lions. This was injustice. I was properly indignant. No, I would not kneel. I held my ground.

Mama couldn't believe it. I could take that. It was harder to take my Aunt Faye sadly wagging her head at me—but I wouldn't give in. How could I? Justice and Right were on the line. I would never betray Justice! Not me!

"Wait till Daddy gets home! I bet you'll get on your knees then," Mama said.

I knew I'd get on my knees then, Justice or no Justice. I'd have to, or Daddy would whip me, and I've always been terrified of my father with a size 40 belt in his hand, but I intended to hold on as long as possible.

This was my contribution to the welfare of Truth and Justice. To this day, I feel the same way about it, as stubborn about it today as I was then.