



# The Wisdom of the Elders

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Life Lessons from and for African American Seniors  
Classes of 2012, 2013, and 2014



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Cover design and page layout by Monte Holman at The Fortlander Agency  
ISBN: 978-0-9855782-1-3

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The content of this text was culled from interviews with participants of the Wisdom of the Elders program in Murfreesboro, TN between 2012 and 2014. Rebecca Bernard, Leslie Collins, Delores Holland and Abbey Mann conducted the original interviews. Professor Lucius Outlaw, Jr. took the photographs. Rebecca Bernard and Delores Holland organized the materials and prepared the text for publication. Cover artwork contributed by Rosie M. Solomon.

# The Wisdom of The Elders Program

serves African American seniors in the Murfreesboro, TN Parks and Recreation's Patterson Park Community Center. In 2012, the City of Murfreesboro was awarded a mini-grant from the Meharry-Vanderbilt Community Engaged Research Core to gather data on the impact of a mental health intervention engaging African American seniors in the production of an autobiography (through print and/or visual media) and intergenerational exchanges. The undertaking, initiated and spearheaded by Professor Ifeoma Nwankwo in collaboration with community partners The City of Murfreesboro Department of Parks and Recreation, Dr. Barbara Hodges and Leroy Hodges, Dr. George Smith, Ms. Mary Watkins, and academic partners William Turner, Ph.D., Peabody College and James Powers, MD, Vanderbilt-Reynolds Geriatric Education was created to gather information about and develop new ways to enhance the general health, mental health and social engagement of seniors.

In the pilot year, 22 seniors enrolled and participated in the project. Local experts in ancestry preservation, art and intergenerational history facilitated weekly workshops from January through May. Seniors were invited to value their health and celebrate their lives by sharing their life stories in recorded interviews, art, and creative writing.

The City of Murfreesboro Parks and Recreation Department recognized the success of the program and was inspired to include The Wisdom of the Elders as part of their senior programming for 2013. The Vanderbilt English Department continued to provide crucial sustaining sponsorship, as did Voices From Our America. Vital in-kind support was provided by workshop leaders, Ms. Mary Watkins, Dr. George Smith, and Dr. Barbara Hodges and Leroy Hodges as well as by Edited Places Organizing. In 2014, the program was renewed for a third year, continuing its mission to invite seniors to share their wisdom and explore and preserve the historical significance of their lives.

As an aspect of The Wisdom of the Elders project, participants had the opportunity to share in extensive life history interviews. Those interviews gave them the opportunity to detail their experiences from birth to adulthood. The participants listed below agreed to publicly release their answers to the final question of the interview. Two additional participants agreed to share their answers but chose to remain anonymous.

Willie Paulette Albert

Josephine Bass

Edward Shannon Blackman

Etta Collier

Christine Cowan

Annie Frazier

Irma Goodman

Nancy Sanders Green

Kathryn B. Knight

Sarah Knox

Carolyn Sneed Lester

Thelma Marshall

Billy McKinley

Margaret McKinley

Dorothy Orr

Fannie Randolph

Odestine Roland

Diane Smith

Rosie M. Solomon

Gracie Turner

Linda Vickers

Laura Louella Washington

Katie Wilson

Each of the participants was asked the following question:

If you had the opportunity to convey a message to the younger generation of your community, what would you tell them?



## **Willie Paulette Albert**

The young people in the community, I would tell them, use your mind wisely. Stay in school. Treat everybody right. Be a man. Dress appropriately. I tell my grandson, dress like you want to be somebody. Don't dress like you want to be a hoodlum in the streets. Give respect to get respect. Be honest and get your education so you can compete in the world.





## **Josephine Bass**

They should be more responsible. They should just get involved. Obey their parents. Stay out of trouble. Go to school, number one is go to school, and get you an education because they're going to need that. Today they don't realize it, but in days to come they're going to need that education.



## **Edward Shannon Blackman**

To have a positive outlook on life. They are going to meet some obstacles and there are going to be a lot of bumps in the road, but keep the eye straight ahead. Don't get discouraged if there is a setback, just keep looking to what the goal is. And I think they need a goal, they need to have something to look forward to. Where am I going? How will I get there? Work on that plan, I think they'll be alright.

## **Etta Collier**

Get all the education you can, and after you get it, get involved in your church and the community.



## **Christine Cowan**

I think now that most of us are trying to teach our kids how to make something of themselves, how to stay out of trouble, how to love one another. I think that's just about all there is.



## **Annie Frazier**

Question your parents, your grandparents. Ask questions about your family, where they came from, the style of living, about their community that they lived in, and the schools and the education that they received. Ask questions about them so that you will know about your parents, your grandparents, what kind of lifestyle they lived. Because I regret that I didn't ask those questions, but I didn't know to ask them till I got older and I was interested in where my grandparents came from, who their parents were and things of that nature.



## **Irma Goodman**

I would just tell them to continue to stay in school, study hard and just trust God to keep guiding your life. You know, remember that you're not better than anybody else and nobody else is better than you.



## **Nancy Sanders Green**

Discover who you are and what your purpose in life is, and by that I mean, know you, what you like and what you want to do and focus on that. I'm specifically speaking from the Christian standpoint, because I believe God has a purpose and a path for everybody. So once you learn that, go toward that.

## **Kathryn B. Knight**

Young people need to seek a relationship or even leave a relationship if it does not make a positive impact on what your goal is. Number one, they have to learn to play by the rules, and there are two sets of rules unfortunately, but you have to learn how to play. You can go into a basketball game and try and use the rules of a football game, you're not going to succeed. So try and identify with people who are going to support you and help you make the change you want in your life... be able to see through and identify the people who are going to be a positive influence and people who are not. It's extremely hard for anybody, black, white, brown whatever, to break a cycle, whether it's situational or generational. But if it's generational, it's very hard to break out and leave. I have friends whose parents would say 'You trying to be better than us? Why do you want to do that?' and it takes a very strong, mature kid, unless they have another influence, role model, to break away from things that are not going to contribute positively to what they want to do. Look around and try to identify what you want to do and how you're going to get there, even if it means you're going to have to give up some relationship for a certain amount of time or maybe forever.



## **Sarah Knox**

Stay in church. Stay in church. I think going to church is the biggest thing you can do. I think that keeps you out of the streets and it seems like the minute they take you out of church, everything just happens. Get an education and stay in church.



## **Carolyn Sneed Lester**

Work hard in school. Be attentive and listen to what the teacher has to say. Go home and review that. Plan on going to a trade school or college and doing the best that you can do. When you get a job, stay on that job and don't worry about how the boss is treating you, unless it's very discriminatory. Be on time. Be at the job every day. Be dependable. Do your work, stay there and you can retire. And after you retire, you can enjoy life.



## **Thelma Marshall**

From a very young age, if you teach the children how to love each other, love themselves, love yourself, then you will be able to share love and give it to someone else.



## **Billy McKinley**

Get involved and stay involved with the political, the churches, the community and [don't] just say you're part of the organization, do something while you're in the organization, because you know, they're our last hope. After we're gone, they're out there.

## **Margaret McKinley**

I just hope that they will be more involved, that they will find ways to do more than we did. To make a positive impact, cause it's their community, it's their state, it's their nation, it's their world. Sometimes they lose focus, just like we lost focus during the child-rearing ages, and you have to focus on that. But everything is global now. We Skype our granddaughter and she's in Texas, and we talk to her every week. Last night at church, we had a leadership training seminar, and he was saying that he had gone to Africa and he was able to communicate with his kids, so if we have that kind of communication capabilities, we can do better at communicating and developing our strengths and fortifying our weaknesses and moving forward.



## **Dorothy Orr**

I want them to do two things, forget and remember.  
Forget all the negative things that come upon you, just  
forget the negative, and remember all the good things.



## **Fannie Randolph**

I would say, keep focused and keep God in their life. With the help of God, there's nothing that you can't achieve.



## **Odestine Roland**

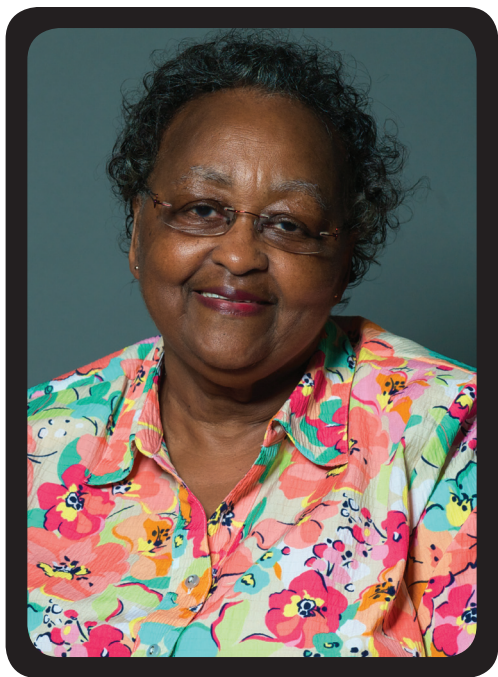
Know your roots. I think that the younger generation should know where they came from. They should try to find out who their people are because a lot of them don't know and seems as though they're not interested.



## **Diane Smith**

Treat people the way you want to be treated. Take the time to find out about that person. You'll be surprised to find out what you find out. They're not as bad as you think. They don't know that much more than you. They want the same things that you do. Don't jump to conclusions.





## **Rosie M. Solomon**

God loves all of us regardless of the color of our skin. Some people think that everybody owes them something, but you've got to get out and do what you can do for your own self. You can't be sitting around waiting for someone else to do it for you.

## **Anonymous**

I think that most of our younger people need to try to develop better coping skills for problems and issues that come up in life. If you have a job, [and] you're not the boss, you need to realize that and make the best of what you have.



## **Gracie Turner**

First, you have prayer in your heart, love. Live. Laugh. There's so much to be done for these children now. You have to do [it] for yourself. You can't make up a mind, but you can leave that with them. And it'll be better for all of us when we learn to do that. Nobody can drill it into you, you have to learn it for yourself. Children are going to have to listen, look, learn and be sure to go with the Lord first.



## **Linda Vickers**

Live a life of love, peace, wisdom. Stay in good health and think about what you can do to help others so that they can have a better life. That would be the significant message I would want to pass along to the next generation.



## **Laura Louella Washington**

Stay in school, try and learn all you can. Try to prepare yourself for adulthood, because it's hard, it's hard, I mean it's rough. You need to prepare yourself and learn all you can while you can. Well, you never stop learning. You never get too old to learn. You can do a lot for yourself while you're young. Like I said, try to prepare yourself, try to learn all you can, try to do all you can and prepare yourself for this mean world. (laughs)

## **Anonymous**

I would still say the most important thing is to meet yourself to God, and to use him as your direction and with every decision you have to make, consult him first.

## **Katie Wilson**

My message would be, you have the greatest opportunity as young people now, because race should not be what your life is geared around, it should be how you're going to serve the community. No matter how you are connected, it seems like you should give back something to the community. That you want to serve no matter what your gifts are in life. It took the whole community for you to grow as a person. We hope that you become productive citizens. That you're going to help the community to develop further. That changes can occur that are positive. That it would benefit all races of people, because now we have people of color from every nation living here in Rutherford county. But you as a person, you cannot close yourself down to only being in your little group. You have to get outside that group, and what we always say, get outside the box.

WOE began in 2012, linking the interests of faculty members from English, Human and Organizational Development, and Geriatrics at Vanderbilt with the needs and knowledge bases of African American older adults, family doctors, genealogists, artists, community historians, and the largest community center in the City of Murfreesboro. From January-May of 2012, 2013 and 2014 the seniors participated in weekly month-long workshops facilitated by Murfreesboro-based experts in genealogy, art, and community history as well as by a Vanderbilt M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

