

I was born Bernice Jones April 2, 1950. According to my birth certificate, I was born early on a Sunday morning, the fifth live birth to Evangeline Flemming and Robert Flynn Jones. I was born in Harlem Hospital. My mother was an evangelist and my father was a deacon in the church. Religion was ingrained in us. They were pentecostal.

Naturally, I don't remember much about that time, but my mother tells me that the family was living on Old Broadway at that time. I was to learn later that even at that time things weren't going well for my parents and that's why nine months later my grandfather, Clarence Flemming who was the pastor of his own church, came to New York and got me and took me back to South Carolina on the Silver Comet.

On my own the first thing I remember is sitting on my grandfather's lap while he read his newspaper. That's where I learned to read. After learning to read I bugged him to death to go to school so he fixed it so I could go to school. I was four years old.

My grandparents lived in a huge house in Eastover, South Carolina. It was a big sprawling wooden house shaped something like a capital L. It had no running water and no indoor plumbing, but it was a home.

The house sat about five hundred yards back off highway 76. A tree lined driveway led up to the house. The entrance to the driveway was surrounded by rose bushes and the the trees that lined the driveway were flowering trees.

All the land on both sides of the highway almost as far as

you could see belonged to my grandfather. I loved the freedom of running and playing. I loved the fruit trees that was plentiful. The figs, pears, grapes, scuppernong, plums, mulberries etc. I hated picking cotton and having to work in the field.

Joe Nathan and Robert C., my two older brothers, and Mary and LaVella, my two older sisters, were there too and together with my Uncle Ike and my Aunt Pauline, we were one big happy family. Uncle Ike and Aunt Pauline were about the same age as my brothers and sisters.

When I was getting ready to go into the third grade my mother came to South Carolina to get us and take us back to New York. I must have been about seven years old at the time.

I was apprehensive about the change that was occurring. Up until then I thought my grandparents were my parents.

When we came back to New York we lived in the Bronx on Forrest Ave. I had younger brothers by then also.

I went to a public school not far from the house and my sisters went to Dunbar Jr. High School. All I could think about was going to Dunbar. I knew the school song and sang it all the time.

In the borough of the Bronx  
On a street called Caldwell Avenue  
Is the Dunbar Jr. High School  
With its colors, blue and gold  
Blue the color of the sky  
Gold the color of the sun  
Ever upward is our aim  
With our emblem floating high.

I dreamt of being where my sisters were and I did everything I could to live up to them. To fit in.

I don't know why, but it was like, as far as my mother was concerned, there was my older sisters and brothers and then there was myself and my brother Ivan who was two years younger than me. Two different sets of children.

The difference in the treatment was so marked that I simply didn't believe that Momma was my mother. I came to the conclusion that I must have been adopted. One night, just before we left for church, I told her that. I guess I must have had enough, because I remember screaming at her, "You're not my mother. I'm adopted."

I always had this insatiable thirst for knowledge so school was never a problem for me. I wanted to go to school, but I had a hard time getting along with the other students. I never wanted to play the games they played so I was always out of step with my peers.

My brother Ivan used to get beat up for his lunch and money and would end up fighting for him.

My mother took all of us, there was nine of us by now, and went back to South Carolina when I was getting ready to go into the sixth grade. My father stayed behind in New York. I don't remember ever being told why he didn't come with us. I don't remember asking either.

We stayed with my grandparents and I went to elementary school at Crossroads #2. It was a one story school house that sat just off the intersection between the 76 Highway and 301. Rev. Butler was the principal and his daughter, Margaret Butler was in the same class with me.

Margaret Butler, Paulette Simon and I were to be pitted

against each other later on for class valedictorian and spelling champ.

During the winter of 1959, my grandparents' house burnt down.

I'll never forget that night. We'd all been sent to bed early. Living in the house at that time was my Aunt Pauline and her husband, Uncle John. They had a newborn baby and they stayed in the two rooms that led off to the right of the bedroom that the girls slept in.

There was my grandparents, who slept in the bedroom directly in front of the girls bedroom. It also served as a family room. It was really huge.

To the left of the girls' room was the boys' bedroom and to the left of that was the kitchen.

There was a walkaround porch that connected all of these rooms from the outside in the back and front of the house. The only room that could not be reached from the walkaround porch was the girls' room. It was wedged in the center of the boys' room, my Aunt Pauline and Uncle John's room and my grandparent's room.

As I was saying, this particular night we were sent to bed early. No matter how I tried to stay up they would have none of it.

I had been in bed for approximately an hour when I started smelling smoke. I got up to tell somebody but I guess they thought I was just coming up with another excuse to stay up. Anyway, I finally followed the direction of the smoke and it was coming from my Aunt's rooms.

I went and got my mother and took her to it. By the time she

got there the smoke was so thick you could cut it with a knife. My Aunt came running screaming, "My baby, my baby". It seems her baby was in the room on the other side of her's sleeping.

They couldn't get in it through the door leading off from my room so my mother quickly ran to the door on the porch and tried to get in from that direction. When she opened the door she was met with a burst of flames in her face.

The flames singed her hair and it never grew back.

Everyone else got out the house safely. We all stood outside in the dark or huddled in cars and watched while the house burned to the ground. My Aunt Pauline was uncontrollable. Her baby died in the fire.

The next day we learned that except for burns to the hands and feet the baby was untouched. A door had fallen on her and kept her intact. I didn't get to see her but we were told that she suffocated from the smoke and looked like an angel.

After the fire we went to stay with my Aunt Mary Jane and her family. They lived in a house back off the road. 'Way back and in the middle of a field. There was a woods about 500 yards in the back of it and fields to the side and in front of it.

I remember there was a walnut tree in the middle of one of the fields.

My mother and I was out in the field gathering walnuts one day when all of a sudden she dropped everything she had, grabbed her skirts and took off toward home screaming "snake". I think she must have forgot I was with her because she never looked back.

I saw her running, heard what she was screaming and took off

running behind her. Anything that could cause my mother to act like that must be something to be afraid of. I didn't see the snake, but I was just as afraid.

We stayed with Aunt Mary Jane and went to school from there. After school we would go down to help with building Grand-daddy's new house.

We didn't move back into the new house when it was finished. We moved into Hurly Higgin's House. It wasn't even a real house. It was little more than a shack. No water, and half the time no electricity.

It was just my mother, and the rest of us.

Those were really hard times. My two older brothers, Robert and Joe, were in high school along with my two older sisters. Everyone did something to help keep food in the house. Momma worked in the cotton field picking cotton.

Daddy came down to visit us once and Momma became pregnant. She worked in the cotton field right up until the time she went into the hospital to have the baby.

I remember entering the spelling bee because the prize was money and I thought I could help out by winning this money and we could have some food in the house.

Momma was too proud to ask her family for help.

I read this story in school about the dark horse and how he won. It seems he would help everyone else with their studying and by doing so the constant exposure to the material made it come naturally to him. He didn't even know that he was learning the material himself.

I decided that if that was true I could apply the same theory to this spelling bee and increase my chances of winning. I volunteered to call the words to everyone when they wanted to study. I won. I won and took the money home to Momma and did my share in keeping food on the table.

By the time Momma had the baby I was going to Webber High School. I was in the 7th grade.

I remember I was walking from one class to another when I heard it on the radio. "Born to Mrs. Evangeline Jones, a girl". I dropped my books and danced across the lawn, cheering. I was finally not the baby girl anymore.

My happiness was shortlived though, for Patricia didn't come home right away. She was very sick and had to stay in the hospital. They had to feed her intravenously and had tubes all over her.

My mother had had to work in the fields the entire pregnancy and a lot of the time she didn't eat at all. She even went into labor in the field. They didn't think Pat was going to make it. Daddy didn't come down during this time.

By this time, my brother Joe was so fed up that he went to New York to find my father and bring him back. When he came back a couple of weeks later, he came alone but he brought some things with him.

Before that year was over both of my brothers and left to go into the Marine Corp. They were determined that they were going to take care of us. They went together on the buddy plan so they could take care of each other. The rest of us went back to New York to stay with our father.

1962 -

Daddy had an apartment on 118th St. between Park and Lexington, in Manhattan. There were five and half rooms.

I went to JHS 45 on 120th St., LaVella went to Benjamin Franklin HS and Mary went to Julia Richmond.

It was this year that I met Jeanette. Her mother was Sister Hargrove, the head of the Usher Board at my Uncle Melvin's church, Mt. Zion Tabernacle. Sister Hargrove was a real close friend of my father's and my baby sister Pat's godmother. To this day I don't really know the nature of their relationship but ... Jeanette was our (sic) sister.