



MY LIFE, MY STORY

RHONDA



UNITED STATES ARMY

1979-2000



So Much More to Tell

Rhonda

I was born in the Chelsea Naval Hospital. My father was in the Air Force, so he is a Veteran too. I was raised in Roxbury, MA. Back then, there were three of us: one sister who was two years older than me and a brother who was one year younger than I was. Then my mother had another baby at 40 years old, even though she had her tubes tied. My



baby brother is 22 years younger than me.

When I was a kid, in 1966, I was one of the first Black students to participate in the METCO program at Lincoln. It's a program that buses inner city kids to the suburbs to attend school.

There were only ten of us initially. Since I was the first to go all the way through the program from preschool to high school, they had me speak at the graduation. My sister went to an inner-city school, and I could see the differences between schools in the inner city and suburbs because they didn't have the necessary

supplies. People always asked me how I felt as the only Black kid in class. But when I was young, no one cared about the difference in skin color until junior high school. Then the name calling started from a small group of kids. But I



was generally well liked as a kid because I was an athlete. I played all kinds of sports. I was captain of the basketball team in high school.

If you were in the METCO program, they give you host parents, so that if you got stuck at school, your host parents take care of you until your parents can come from the city. Wednesdays were half-days, so I would go over to my host parent's home in the afternoon.

I was featured in the New York times in 1966.

There's a picture of me and my host family's daughter. We were holding stuffed bunnies and both smiling-both of us didn't have any front teeth. I'm still in contact with my host family through Facebook. I talk to them from time to time.

When I was in elementary school, I was a teacher's pet. That teacher was Ms. Watson. I found her on Facebook and we met up in person recently. Back then, she used to have my family over at her house in Belmont. She had this huge Saint Bernard dog that drooled over everybody; it was very fun. She also taught us how to toboggan and we would slide down huge hills.

Buses That Bring Together Two Separate and Unequal Worlds

By LENA HARRISON. BOSTON—In the living rooms and hallways, in the kitchens and backyards of exhausted old homes in the Boston ghetto and gleaming new houses in the affluent Boston suburbs, black and white parents are moving toward each other in a tentative embrace, while their children play together unsupervisedly in the back rooms. The modest changes that are taking place—in attitudes, in understanding, in social relationships—are being brought about to a large degree by the presence of one active participant in METCO—the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. For every black child bused into a community there is a suburban family with a child in the same grade, responsible for him. The purpose is to have someone who will look out for the bused-in child in emergencies. And for some participating parents, that is all the host plan is. But for others, this specifically educational program has had social side effects, the value of which the future will decide. For some black and white parents, who have taken this opportunity to come together for the first time, however tentatively, it has meant the beginning of a sense of one another as human beings rather than as symbols of frightening racial stereotypes.

A ROUTE FROM GHETTO TO SUBURB To give some of the children of Boston's black ghettos a chance for better schooling than they had been getting in the decaying and troubled Boston public schools, the black-run Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) was founded three years ago. Its plan, financed by Federal and State funds and a Carnegie Corporation grant, is to bus black children into public schools in the Boston suburbs. The 1967-68 school year from the Roxbury-Dorchester ghettos to schools in nearby all-white suburbs. This year 517 black pupils (the number more than doubled in a year) are attending classes from kindergarten through high school in 28 participating suburban communities. Some 700 other children are on the waiting list, and eight other communities have applied to join the program. (Additional impetus was given the venture after the assassination last April of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) With only 10 children dropping out or removed from the program last year, METCO views its plan as a success.

For their high school-age children, it has meant more self-conscious friendship and date friction. But for the small children, who started school together in kindergarten and who for three years have played together and slept in one another's houses, it has meant the beginning of a more intimate vision beyond the color of the skin in the humanly personal. Delight, darkened by apprehension, was what Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Williams felt at the prospect of sending their 5-year-old daughter, Rhonda, to kindergarten three years ago in the suburb of Lincoln, Lincoln is a 25-minute school bus-ride away from Roxbury, where the Williams live. Although they had met their host family—the Alexander's, Nelley—and been shown around the bright new school, they worried about how Rhonda would be received. "I don't know," recalled Mrs. Williams, who is a co-sponsor for the Boston anti-segregation program, "if that particular community would say, 'Okay, we'll accept your kids,' but underneath they really wouldn't mean it." They have since felt reassured.



Washed by bunnies, 7-year-old Susan Nelley, left, and Rhonda Williams—friends and schoolmates since kindergarten—play together in suburban ranch house of Susan's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Nelley.

New York Times, April 14th, 1969



Rhonda with host family.



Five out of the ten original METCO students.



Rhonda's mother Deborah in a METCO program article.

High school was different. There was that group that did the name calling. But by the time I got to high school, there were more of us - two busloads of METCO students. It was different because I wasn't the only Black student in the class. I would have to get up for school at 6 a.m. and didn't get home from basketball practice until 7 p.m. If I had a basketball game, it would be even later than that. But enough about school.

Now I'm going back to my baby brother. My mother died from lung cancer when my youngest brother was three. My mother wanted me to take care of him, so he grew up in the military service. I didn't want to leave Rhonda away because I was ripping my baby brother from everyone he knew right after my mom's death.



At home on leave with brother Edwin



Basic Training

Rhonda



Basic Training, 1979



I had to go through the court system to get guardianship. When I got called to South Carolina, I was told that guardianship wasn't good enough. He wouldn't get any benefits. I had to go through the court system again to adopt him. Legally, he is my son, but by blood, he is my brother and he knew it. His classmates would say "Your mother is here," and he would say, "that's my sister, not my mother."

I did three tours in Germany. I had many roles: flight medic, worked in the pediatric clinic, labor and delivery, medical hold first sergeant, instructor, section sergeant, platoon sergeant, re-enlistment, etc.



The Gulf War/Desert Storm

Rhonda

I got deployed to the first Gulf War in Saudi on Dec 4th, 1990 and was put back in the platoon from Headquarters Platoon. My platoon sergeant had never been in a



field unit before, and I also had a platoon leader second lieutenant fresh out of school, so the soldiers would all come to me because I used to be a platoon sergeant and knew what to do. We were at war then, driving through Iraq, supporting the 1st Cavalry Unit from Fort Hood, Texas.



Desert Storm

Rhonda

I had to write someone up because he was sleeping at the wheel. I told him to switch places with the female soldier in my vehicle. And he told me, "F U". So, I had to get the male platoon sergeant to tell him to move because he wouldn't listen to me because I was female. He asked to be removed from my vehicle because he got busted to private. I told him NO because he messed up and he needs to suffer the consequences and move on. I didn't treat him any differently. You might not like me, but you have to respect my rank. He stayed in my vehicle. There were scary times while I was in the Gulf War, but when I felt overwhelmed, I would slip away into my vehicle, put my headset on and listen to gospel music which helped me relax.

‘You might not like me, but you have to respect my rank.’



Saudi



Rhonda

While stationed at Fort Rucker as an instructor at the School of Aviation Medicine, I had met this man in a class on post. He was the perfect gentleman. We were both in leadership positions. He was E8 and up for promotion. I was E6-staff sergeant up for promotion too. We started talking and dating. He would pick me up, hold the door open, we'd go out to eat, all that good stuff. Orders came down for him for Germany. He asked me to marry him. We got married in Denmark. I went back to the States and waited for my orders to be with him. I was in love.

He made sergeant major and I made sergeant first class. He finds me an assignment in the health clinic as NCOIC that was behind his brigade building. He was a Vietnam Veteran and 14 years older than me. He presented himself very well. He demanded respect and got it, even from the officers. He knew his job, was a great soldier and had a Bronze Star. He had been married twice before and this was my first marriage.



Return to Germany from Saudi

Rhonda

He started thinking I was looking at other men. When we were in Germany one of his soldiers-staff sergeant E6-was working for me; he had soldiers working in the clinic also. I was talking soldier business.

My husband starts banging on the door, berating me, made the staff sergeant leave. He was doing crazy things. He was very paranoid. He began abusing me. If I ever had a black eye-I hid it. If I had an injured ankle, I'd say I hurt myself play-



ing basketball. I hid it. No one actually knew about the abuse because I hid it very well. It was embarrassing. I kept it under wraps. He retired and we moved to Fort Carson, CO. My job was NCOIC of the ER. There were civilians, nurses, desk clerks and military medics.

I'm working in the ED, my husband retired, bought a big house, really nice-the abuse continues. He started using drugs. It was like Jekyll and Hyde. The most serious thing that happened was-I'm in bed, I see him acting peculiar, going in and out of the bedroom and arguing. He picks up his wooden guitar and hit my left elbow and right hip so hard the guitar broke. I'm hurt, and he's helping, saying sorry-he has the *boohoos*.

He's helping get me dressed to go to the hospital but changes his mind. I hear him in the kitchen going through the utensils, I know to get a knife because he wants to kill me. I ran out of the house, hid in the bushes. I get to a gas station and ask a cab to take me somewhere. The cab driver said he's off duty, but he could see how distraught I was, so he helped me and drove me to my girlfriends' house-I knew her from Germany-and her husband took me to my own ER. The civilian nurses kept the soldiers away from me. Now the nurses knew that I was being abused.



Rhonda

My son/brother was living with us. One time he was on the phone, my husband picked up the phone, yelled at him to get off the phone, was trying to antagonize him, calling him names. My son goes upstairs, then my husband hit him in the head with an aluminum bat. They're fighting, our dog-a rottweiler-is biting him, I'm trying to break it up. My husband gets a black eye. He went to my ER and he was like *why are they treating me so badly?* The nurses knew the deal of how he was treating me.

We'd be in that honeymoon cycle. It was bad. He left the house and moved in with a friend. He moved back home saying he had to because his friend had to move. Then it went right back to the abuse. When he would hit me, I was so shocked, I'd just start crying. I thought *this man is supposed to love me*; he'd call me names and I'd say *just because you say so, doesn't make it so*.

He tried to isolate me from family and friends I'd known longer than I knew him, but he never stopped me from talking to friends and family when he hit me. We stayed married for six years. He'd move out, start courting me, make an excuse to move back in and then be back at his old ways. We had the honeymoon cycle, anger, violence, presents, makeup, calm, repeat. I would hear on the news about things that were happening to other women; there were two in a row, where the husbands showed up and killed their wives. I thought God was trying to show me something, sending me signs. I needed to leave Colorado. That's why I retired. I had my 20 years and I had just got there, so the Army wasn't going to move me. I got divorced, put in for retirement, and came home to Boston.





Rhonda

When I retired from the Army in 2000, I wanted to do something where I didn't have to be in charge anymore because I had so many leadership positions in the Army from two and a half years in until retirement. I got a commercial driver's license and worked for Hertz. I liked it, but I quit after a year because I didn't like how they treated their employees.

I went on to nursing school and it was very easy for me because the Army had taught me all the skills and more; everything was very familiar. My classmates always wanted me in their study group. I graduated cum laude. I became a nurse and the first job I got was at BMC and I did med-surg telemetry; I stayed there for about nine years.

Then I worked as a visiting nurse and later as a traveling nurse. I've worked in several hospitals here -Mass General, Lahey, St. Luke's, Cambridge Hospital. I stayed at Cambridge for one and a half years because they liked me a lot. I also worked the night shift on inpatient psychiatry at Westwood Lodge with children, adolescents and adults. I liked that too.

In life, I always liked to do what I wanted to do. I didn't work all year long because I wanted to travel, ride horses, and be around my family and I'm glad I have such a close-knit family. My mother's side lives in Boston and my father's side lives in New Jersey. We used to go down to New Jersey every summer as kids and we are still close.



Lahey Hospital
& Medical Center



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Rhonda

I had surgery and after one week I had a saddle PE (pulmonary embolism), died three times and came back with CPR. I believe in a close family. But after this episode and almost facing death, reality hit me. *Wow, if I died, I would just be gone, and everybody's lives would continue to go on.* Of course, they would cry and be sad, but everything else just continues. So even though I'm still young, I need to get my affairs in order because tomorrow is not promised to anyone.

My siblings never expected this to happen to me because I was the healthiest out of them. I never smoked and only drank a little. One of the nurses in the ICU- she'd been a nurse for over 30 years- told me when I woke up that *"I've never worked so hard in my life to try and keep someone alive."* I came back three times from CPR. When I woke up, I couldn't do anything for myself. I couldn't even walk, talk or feed myself. Going through the recovery was hard physically and mentally. I had no muscle tone anywhere.

I couldn't talk because I was still intubated, couldn't move at all. The first time they got me up to walk, I thought I would die. My ankles felt like they were bro-



On life support at Boston Medical Center



With sister Robin, who did CPR until ambulance arrived

ken. But it was good to know when I was intubated and fighting for my life, my family was there, my 1st cousins, 2nd cousins, and friends from high school and the military. I have pictures from that time. I'm glad, because I wouldn't have known how sick I really was

Rhonda

and all the things I went through. Nobody would have been able to tell me how bad off I was.

Since the PE, I'm still not all the way back to how I was before. Getting around feels different, it's a chore-things are not as easy as they used to be, my thinking-it just takes me an extra minute to process. My balance is off when I'm tired, my feet are numb two years later, my hair came out. I have to stay on blood thinners for life. But it's a small price to pay for being alive.

People look at me like I'm OK, like *Oh you look good; you got through it*. Outwardly I do look good, but I'm not really the same as I was before. That's hard for me. I have to let people know that I'm not OK, not yet, although I'd love to be. I was a nurse, but I made a decision not to go back, because I knew it wasn't worth the risk of killing

someone if I wasn't at my best. I'm lucky-I know that people usually don't survive what I did or if they do survive, they could be a lot worse off. There's so much more I could say. My family and friends tell me I should write a book because my life is very interesting. God has a plan for me I guess, I just don't know what it is. I try to do the right thing for others. I'm taking care of my father with pancreatic cancer. I know tomorrow is never promised; I hope I can stay awhile.





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