

SOMETHING I NEED TO SAY

UNCOMMON
LIFE STORIES

Bob Demchuk

INTRODUCTION

Uncommon life stories are all around us. Our commonplace worlds are filled with them. It is, after all, the way we are made. The human spirit is vital and tends toward the good. When it goes wrong, we recognize this as a failure. Love, compassion, giving, play—these attributes are what make us who we are. And those who love the most, who give the most, who know the life-changing value of play, are the people who inspire us to be our best selves.

All too often, however, we don't even know they are there, standing next to us in a shopping lane, sitting across from us on a bus or train.

And their stories are simply amazing.



When I was a little girl, my grandmother told me how she barely survived on eating roots from their desolate farm in Nazi-occupied Holland. The Nazis killed her husband; she was starving and eight months pregnant with my mother. She prayed each night for something, anything, to eat. She reached a point of utter despair and had given up hope of surviving through another night. The next morning, she looked out from her open door and there, in a distant field, were torn cardboard boxes containing dented cans of food.

I would not exist if it were not for those compassionate B-17 airmen. I hope one day I could tell them, Thank you for giving me a wonderful life.



Woman in Amsterdam

Ben

In 1927, at three years of age, he left Moldova with his parents, and his character was forged growing up on the rough and tumble cobblestone streets of the Bronx during the Great Depression.

Ben was twenty-one in 1944 and a member of the 95th Bomb Group, based in Harham, England. As a radio operator / gunner, one of nine crew members of a B-17, he flew thirty-plus missions over Nazi-occupied territories to and from Berlin. During these 10-hour bombing runs, Ben would play his Hohner accordion to entertain the others when they were not being fired upon, which was often. On their return trips, the B-17 would fly at the death-defying altitude of 500 feet, taking hostile fire while crew members dropped their 25 boxes of food supplies from the bomb bay doors to the starving people of Nazi-occupied Holland.

Thirty-two years ago, Ben's younger brother Murray met Loek, a Dutch woman vacationing in the United States. She had lived through these horrible times and was helped by the B-17 humanitarian flights called Operation Manna and Operation Chowhound. Since that first encounter, Murray and Loek have been a couple and are still going strong today. At 91, Ben is the Commander of VFW Post 7462 in Piermont, New York, and visits veterans in hospitals, saying to them, "Tell your story. Don't let the story die with you."



Ben - B-17 Crewmember



My grandmother is a quiet, unassuming person. That may be the reason why I was a college student when I found out for the first time that she, along with my great-aunt and cousin, was one of the first African-Americans to register to vote in Liberty, Mississippi. At a time when blacks were being lynched for any reason or no reason at all, my grandmother risked her life to make our lives better. I am a beneficiary of her tremendous risk and sacrifice, and I am grateful to her beyond words. Somehow I don't think that I have ever told her thank you, so I will do it here. Thank you, Grandma, for making sacrifices so that your children and your children's children could have better futures. Thank you for your bravery in the face of tremendous danger. Thank you for demonstrating for me the importance of standing up for what you believe, taking risks, and living an honorable life. I credit my commitment to social justice to your influence, and I pray that my children and grandchildren will one day be as proud of me as I am of you.

I LOVE YOU!



Terrica, Civil Rights Attorney

Birdie

She was born in Amite County, Mississippi, in 1918, and never left. She was only able to go to school two days a week because the other days she had to help her mother pick cotton. Birdie was among the first three African Americans in the county to register to vote. During the summer of 1960, Birdie, with her sister Matilda and cousin Ernest, waited all day with civil rights leader Dr. Robert Moses on the Liberty Courthouse porch. Eventually each was allowed to enter individually and complete the form permitting them to vote. When they left the courthouse, a patrol car followed them and pulled them over as they reached the county line. Dr. Moses was arrested, tried, and found guilty on vague charges. Using his one phone call, he contacted the U.S. Justice Department, and the charges were dropped.

Birdie: "We had hard times. We had to work and walk to school; children now ride a bus and don't want to go to school . . . Children, you better get an education and vote."



Birdie - Civil Rights Activist



Many young men and planes were lost in heroic bombing runs over Nazi captured territories; either by anti-aircraft fire, like lightning strikes through the clouds below, or attacks from the heavens above by Messerschmitt Bf-109.

I remember the day, on a bombing run to Berlin, there were shouts of Bogie at 12 o'clock high, as twenty Messerschmitt appeared and immediately began their fierce attack on our sixty Bombers.

Then a flash of the Red Tail P-51B were seen and we knew our guardian angels were here to protect us...Godspeed Tuskegee Airmen.



Ben, B-17 Crew Member

Charles E.

Born in 1919, into a world of Jim Crow laws of segregation of White Only, Charles learned love from his Grandma Gay, and respect and discipline from his foster parents. He followed his minister father's belief "That there could be a world where all men treated each other equally." Charles never let his view of this racist world around him lessen his love for this country.

In 1942, his military service began and he became a member of the 332 Fighter Group, now known as the Tuskegee Airmen, whose highly creditable combat record helped reduce the loss of B-17 and B-24 bombers under their escort during WWII.

Charles, as an Air Force combat fighter pilot, has the highest three-war mission total of a 409, (Worlds War II 137, Korean War 100, Vietnam 172). He has been honored for his military service with numerous of awards including: Distinguished Flying Cross. In 2007, President George Bush awards him and the surviving Tuskegee Airmen the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian award. In 2011, Charles was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame.



Charles E. - Tuskegee Airman



Esther, you have one of the most positive outlooks of anyone I know, which is remarkable in light of your experiences as a child during the Holocaust. Your willingness to share your journey from one of the darkest places in human history to hope and renewed life is an inspiration to everyone you touch and all who touch you. Thank you for letting me have the unique honor to introduce you to people and watch the incredible transformation of all those lives as they listen and experience your life story.



Fred, Inspired Friend

Esther

She was ten year old when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939. She and her family were forced into the Lodz Ghetto along with 230,000 other Jews. "There was no water and very little food, people were starving to death. Their swelled-up bellies scared me." In 1944, her family was sent to Auschwitz. "They separated us, men on one side and women and children on the other. A neighbor's little girl was standing alone. My mother quickly went over, held her tight and said 'I will take care of you.'" Josef Mengele, the SS officer known as the "Angel of Death," ran the human experiments at Auschwitz. "He asked my mother, 'Is this your child?' My mother said, 'Yes!' Mengele motioned for my mother, the child and my 12-year-old brother to go to the left. I was deemed fit for work and sent to right. I yelled, 'Mommy, Mommy.' I started to move towards her, but another prisoner grabbed my arm and said, 'Don't you dare move.' She knew where my mother was being sent. I felt a sadness and pain that has never left me. I knew that I would never see her again." Esther was sent to the shower to have her head shaved. Her mother, the little girl and her brother, Pinkas, were sent to one of Auschwitz's seven gas chambers to be exterminated. At 15, Esther was sent to the Bergen-Belsen and Rochlitz concentration camps and spent the next year with her fellow prisoners sleeping in tents, pitched in the freezing cold and snow of Germany. "We slept very close for body heat. One night, a Hungarian woman next to me told me to be strong. In the morning, she was dead." As the war was winding down Esther and thousands of other survivors were force marched for miles to railway stations to be transported to other locations so evidence of their camps could be erased. "They didn't kill us, probably because they didn't want to waste their bullets. I was starving and ate grass to survive. We spent one night at a barn, and I hid in the hayloft. The next morning when everyone was ordered to leave I stayed hidden."

After the war, Esther was reunited with her father. She found her way into the American zone in Germany where she met her husband, Benek, another survivor. "I was seventeen when I came to America on Valentine's Day in 1947. That is when my life began. I love this country. The pain of what happened is always with me and it made me realize how precious life is."



Esther - Holocaust Survivor



The evening prior to the White House event, my father did a reading at a bookstore. When he was finished, the owner, an African American woman named Shirikiana, asked my father, "First of all, has anyone ever thanked you for the courage it took to be a "No-No Boy"? My dad hesitated and said, "Not directly." She then said, "Well, we can take care of that right now." Everyone yelled out "THANK YOU!" and started to applaud. She then continued: "You are my elder. But you are not only my elder, you are one of our nation's elders. And if you don't mind, I would like to do something right now." She reached behind my dad's back and removed an imaginary burden off his shoulders.

The next day, my dad made it to the top of the Lincoln Memorial. And as we stood under the words of the Emancipation Proclamation and looked out on the National Mall, I could not help thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his "I Have a Dream" speech. I remembered those famous words and how they applied to my father at this moment: "Free At Last, Free At Last!" — HE IS FREE AT LAST..

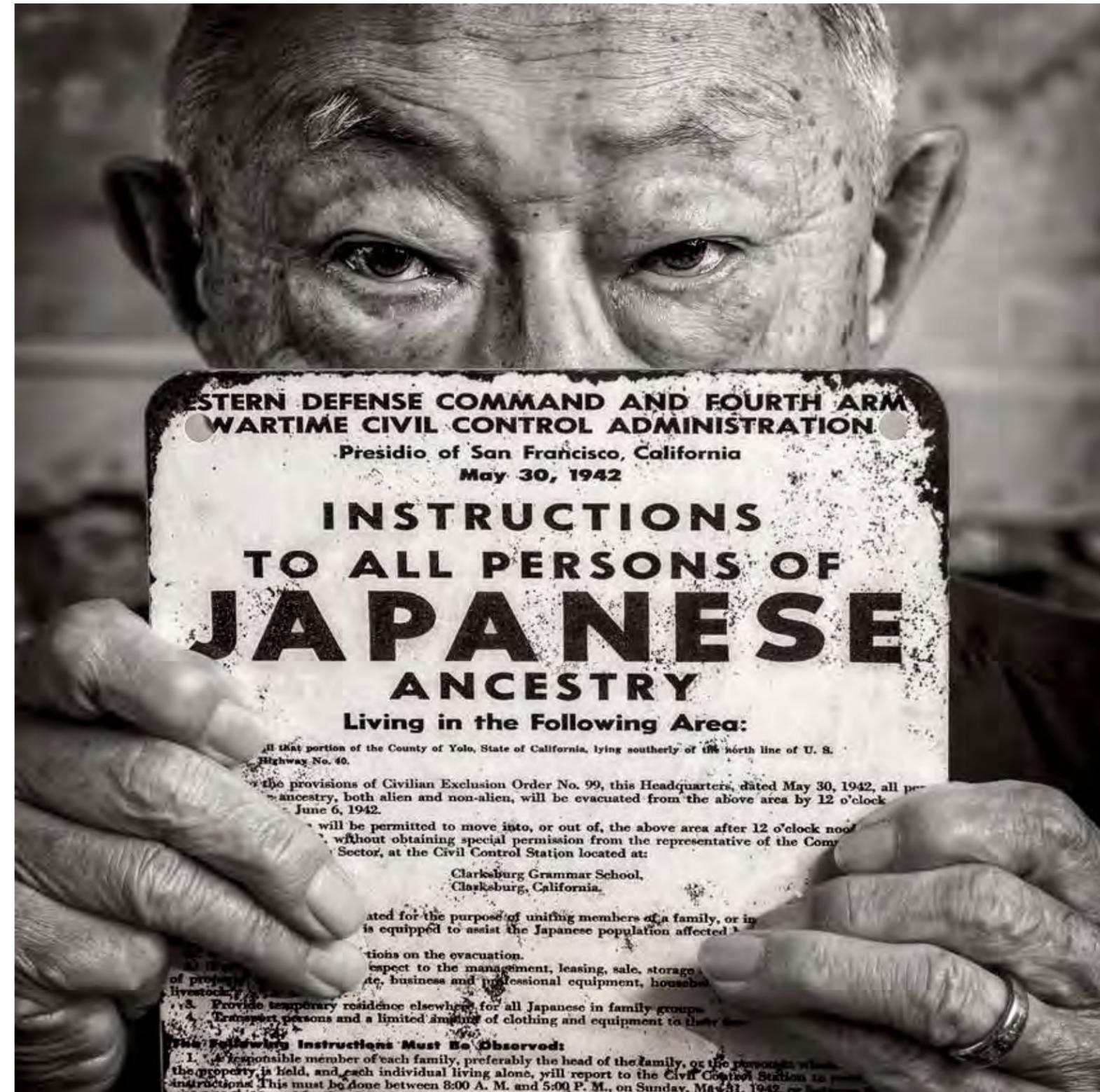


Soji, your Grateful Son

Hiroshi

Growing up in California, he lived in a world of "wealthy whites over here and then everyone else over there." Then in 1942, at age 19, like the one hundred twenty thousand other Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in one of the ten internment camps in California, Arkansas, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, Colorado and Arizona, Hiroshi was sent to the Tule Lake Segregation Center, in Newell, California. Tule Lake was the largest and most conflict-ridden camp, with horrendous dust storms, eight-foot-high fencing and barbed wire. "During my four years in this concentration camp, to fight the boredom I started writing stories and plays and joined the camp's theater company." Then the U.S. government tried to force all detainees to fill out a "loyalty questionnaire." Hiroshi refused because it was in violation of his constitutional rights. He was branded a "No-No Boy," called disloyal and a traitor and lost his citizenship, which affected the next twenty years of his life, until he was able to restore his national identity. Through his writing, acting, and publishing, Hiroshi devoted a large part of his life to making people aware of what it means to be American.

In May 2011, Hiroshi, now an award-winning author, actor, and father of Asian American theater, received a special invitation to attend a poetry reading with President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, at the White House. After the reading Hiroshi said, "Being here, I can say that I'm proud to be an American. There was a time when I couldn't listen to our National Anthem. But now when I hear it, I feel that it's my song, too."



Hiroshi - Internment Camp Survivor



Over the years, Jayde has shown me that she can do things that will amaze you. One of those times was this year at Thanksgiving. There were thirty-five adults, and six children ages five to fourteen. The three oldest kids were watching television downstairs and the two younger ones were playing in the toy box. People were eating, playing games, talking, laughing. Then someone put on some music and everyone came into the living-room and started to dance. Jayde, not wanting to be left out of the festivities, started dancing with her aunt. As the rhythm of the music changed Jayde thought nothing of dropping to the floor, putting her nubby down and break dancing. She made it look so easy.

As the music ended, she held her little nubby up to me to hold and said 'Come on Granny, I have to show you something.' I know Jayde is going to amaze me again and again. I know now that whatever comes Jayde's way as she grows up, she will be fine.



Caroline, her Amazed Grandmother

Jayde

She was born three weeks premature on July 4, 2009. Jayde was so small, only 5 pounds and 14 ounces, and so cute, with blond hair and blue eyes. She lives in a small town in Vermont with her older brother, Timothy (12), who Jayde loves to give a hard time to, and shares a bedroom with her older sister Jasmine (11).

About a year ago, at Christmas, Jayde got a black lab puppy and they are always playing together. But when he chews her stuff, Jayde lets him know that he is a "Bad, Bad, Boy!" Jayde is very independent and wants to do everything herself. She always gets her way with her dad.

However Jayde was born with a birth defect. She has no left hand and only half of her forearm. Naturally one thinks, how is Jayde going to do things? It is going to be so hard for her in life. When Jayde was one, she was taken to Shriners Hospitals for Children in Massachusetts for a prosthetic hand. But she would not wear it. When Jayde was old enough to speak she told everyone, "I am proud of the way I was born and I don't need it."



Jayde - Courageous 5-year-old

“

How did you endure the hand-to-mouth childhood, raised by the vinegary tandem of a spinster aunt and dominating mother? How did your vision stay clear and unembittered?

At the gravesite of your first child, you crushed a sprig of rosemary and offered it, and that scent even now to me is the perfume of life. Three decades later we were living, from my point of view, on divergent tracks, in different worlds. Mine was dark, directionless. “It’s not who you are that counts,” you said. “It’s what you contribute to society.”

Can it be that your concept of love has always had its roots in the real world, the world of results? My five sisters and I have never heard you complain. I know we could not have asked for a more powerful example. Our hearts are full, and if there were a sprig of rosemary here, I’d crush it for its scent, and give it back to you.

”

Michael, your 72-Year-Old Son

Jean

She was born in 1916, the daughter of a divorced suffragette-turned-playwright. At seventeen, she landed the ingénue role in a movie starring W.C. Fields and in the next six years appeared in eleven films. After marrying a screenwriter in the late 1930s, she turned her talents to radio acting and raising a family in Hollywood. Her career was about to take off. Then she and her husband were blacklisted because of their presumed association with the Communist Party. Suddenly unemployable, she and her husband packed up their four children and left the country to avoid being served with a subpoena by the FBI.

Living in exile in Mexico, Jean continued to write short stories, gave birth to two more children and collaborated with her husband on three screenplays. The stories and screenplays generated enough income for the family to get by, and after thirteen years abroad – the blacklist no longer enforced – the family returned to the United States. A short time later, her husband was diagnosed with an untreatable brain disease and died at age 52.

Over the next thirty years, this matriarch was a staff writer on daytime TV dramas, and between TV assignments, she taught a writing course at USC and published seven books.



Jean - Blacklisted



I read the article about magnificent feats the Triple Nickels performed. I became a little angry. My father was a trailblazer and I knew nothing about it. They were sworn to secrecy and he kept that vow until the story began to be discussed nationally only a few years ago. As I have been exposed to the valor of these patriots, it makes me wonder how they remained loyal to an oath and to this country even though it did not respect them as men, let alone as equals.

This loyalty explains much to me as I look at my father as a man. He was and is always the consummate gentleman, thinking of others before himself. In my 50+ years, I have never heard him curse or use a cross word toward anyone. He is always even tempered and level headed. In my mind, he is the personification of a SAINT. I appreciate the life lessons he taught me, and I strive to at least be able to carry his shoes because the ones he left me are way too big for a man like me to fill.



Jerome, your Admiring Son

Jordan

Lived in a racist country but still fought for it. He was a member of an elite detachment called Smokejumpers, a unit of the all-black 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion nicknamed the Triple Nickels.

During WWII, Japan had a secret weapon called *Fu-Go*, fire balloons. They launched 9,300 balloons with ten incendiary bombs each into the upper west-to-east wind currents toward the United States. Three hundred or more reached and exploded in seventeen states as far east as Indiana. When the balloon bombs burst, the 555th members became the first military Smokejumpers to jump out of planes with full gear to extinguish these fires. To keep secret these dangerous missions (Operation Firefly) and the destruction caused by these Japanese weapons, the Army reported lightning strikes was the origin of these fires. "On our first rappel down to the ground, the Army misjudges the height of the 200-foot high trees we landed in and we were given only 50 foot of rope."

Jordan returned, home to raise a family, become a teacher and coach. Taking the teamwork and discipline he learned as a member of *Triple Nickels*, he inspired his students in their academic careers and led several high school football and track teams to State Championships.



Jordan - WW II Smoke Jumper

“

Even through your fog of dementia, you know Daddy is getting closer to the end. You stopped eating and lost ten pounds because you do not want to live without him. I promise that I will honor your request and not force you to eat when you choose not to, although my maternal instinct is to protect you.

”

Kristin, your Caring Daughter

Kenneth & Mary Jule

At the University of Houston in 1946, upon returning from four years of service in the U.S. Navy, Kenneth met a belle from Arkansas, Mary Jule, his wife to be. They began their life journey over a game of bridge and went on to create a formidable partnership – in cards and marriage – that spanned six decades.

Mary Jule was a leading contract bridge player in the United States from the 1950's to the 1970's, while being every bit committed to her home and children. She was a product of her time, choosing to support her husband and family rather than work outside the home. She put her creative energy into homemaking and excelled. She began sewing her own clothes when she was a pre-teen, so by the time she married Kenneth she was a seamstress on a professional level. She made all the family clothing. Her crowning achievement was the formal wedding dress she made for an adopted family member.

Kenneth never let his successful career as a computer scientist interfere with his passion for international travel – and his love of wine and food. When the children reached their teen years, Kenneth and Mary Jule began traveling together. Mary Jule mastered cuisine from each country they visited. Kenneth's goal of visiting all seven continents was realized in 2008 when he celebrated New Year's Day with Mary Jule and their three daughters in Antarctica.

Sixty-seven years of memories together are now being erased. Alzheimer's disease is robbing them both of their past, present, and future memories.



Kenneth & Mary Jule - Both coping with Alzheimer's



Through highs and lows, across land and seas, you have been there for me. An impenetrable rock and a recurring stepping stone in all of my walks in life. You once told me, 'never forget your roots,' in a time where our lives were uprooted. This is my way of remembering. Those words once rang in my ears and now they resonate with me and echo wherever I go, and whomever, I'm with. Thank you for being there, then; and thank you for being here, now. Let this be the watering of the soil for a new bond to grow and I hope, one day my roots can be strong enough to hold you up, like you once held me.



Dominic, your Younger Sister

Louise

At the end of a beautiful family outing on a perfect blue sky day on January 2, 2005, Louise (13) and her sister, Dominic (9) were dropped off at their home in St. George, Utah, by their Greek-born parents Leo and Dena. Their parents continued into town to pick up dinner while the children washed up and prepared the dining room table. But dinner never came; a wrong-way drunk driver took their parents' lives.

Because the sisters did not want to leave the US, their birthplace and home, they were permitted to live with family friends. However, because of cultural differences and never feeling a true part of this foster family, a US court ordered Louise and Dominic to go live with their distant and unfamiliar relatives in Athens, Greece.

Louise's desire to further her education was encouraged at early age by her mother. Louise eventually attended Newcastle University in England and graduated last year with a degree in Business. "Although technically I am an orphan, I have never felt like one except during important life events like my graduation day. All other days are just stepping stones in my life." Dominic is now attending the University of Warwick. Both sisters currently reside in the UK.

Louise has struggled and fought through many battles of misunderstanding and acceptance all the while trying to be a teenager, a sister, a mother and a father for herself and for her sister. "Home is the feeling I have when I am comfortable and I'm comfortable with who I am. I see my sister at least once a year because being with her is like being at home."



Louise - Teenager, Sister, Mother & Father



Chief Domokong, "Before Tomorrow Comes to Kenya"

After Thought

As I look back on my long career as a photographer and filmmaker, I realize that at the heart of every success I have had, large or small, was a story—a narrative, visual or in words, that had the power to connect. Over the past forty years, I have traveled the world and met thousands of people, many of them famous, prominent, and powerful. I have been privileged to work on nearly every continent of the globe. I have seen combat as a soldier, covered headline events as a photojournalist, and shared my life with men and women of all walks of life. I have known extreme danger, witnessed the sublime beauty of rare animals in the wild, and won awards for my work. I have also been blessed in family, love, and friendship. And I have learned this: If you are looking for what really matters in life, it is human connection.

When I completed my memoir, *Before Tomorrow Comes to Kenya*, which contains more than 200 photographs and describes my experiences living among the Pokot of eastern Africa. When the manuscript was accepted for publication by McFarland, I instantly wished that my parents were still alive. I wanted to tell them I was going to be a published author. Naturally I began to think of other things I wanted to say to them but never did. And as I thought about it, I knew I was not alone.

Because of my travels, I know there is no shortage of important stories that need to be told. I also know that the important stories that exist within families or between people who share a strong bond of kinship or gratitude are often the most important of all. That's why I decided to create *Something I Need to Say: Uncommon Life Stories*.