

courageous woman who has survived in spite of all the odds stacked against her through the years. And she is the person who brought hope back into my life.

DRAGGED THROUGH THE MUD

Sandra R. Bell

We owned a business, a construction company called BellincCo. We'd been in business since 1984, mixing concrete and doing other subcontract work. However, in 1991, with a federal freeze on new construction and a little cash in the bank, we decided to fish a little closer to home. We bid on and won two projects: a community building for the local Housing Authority and Fire Station #5 for the city.

It was the beginning of a nightmare. The city council and the Housing Authority Board told us that we weren't qualified to do the projects, although we had the performance and payment bonds for the projects. Most people think of construction bonding as insurance; it's not. Bonding is like getting a loan from a loan shark; you sign your name and a company puts up a paper guarantee in the amount of the contract that you will perform. Then they put up another 50 percent that you will pay everybody. If the owner claims you aren't doing either of those things, he can cash those bonds in.

The powers that be did everything in their power to stop us, from forgetting to inform us that one of the sites was an old dump to telling our employees not to come to work and suppliers not to deliver materials and equipment. With costs mounting, we decided to stop working on the city's fire station project until we could get compensation for the additional work.

That night, a steeple wall above the bay doors for the fire station fell. It was blamed on us when in fact the design of the project didn't have any bracing or ties to anchor the wall to the building.

The next thing we knew, the local ABC affiliate was putting the story on the news. The mayor was out of town when the first, seemingly sympathetic story aired. Later, negative articles appeared in the paper. It was claimed that we weren't working on the other job, even though the community center was well on its way to being completed. The Housing Authority director decided that the community center was not to be built by our company. In fact, he was quoted in the newspaper as saying that my husband had never had any intention of finishing the job and wasn't a decent person.

Not to be outdone, the mayor staged an ambush for my husband at the project site. The mayor showed up with his driver, the city attorney, and a full entourage of Black city councilmen. That night on the six o'clock and eleven o'clock news, there was our white mayor, at 6'6" towering over my 5'8" husband, demanding that he do the job the city was paying us to perform.

The stories continued. Our motives were assessed and our character was examined and attacked. We were informed by friends that "they're going to get you and they're going to get whoever tries to help you."

Another business owner told us some of them were going to get contracts as a result. He added, "Sorry it had to be at your expense." All I could think of was how unfair it was for us to be treated this way. I had never felt so down.

Then I remembered falling in the hog pen when I was a child. My grandparents had had about fifteen hogs in a fenced-in area. After a rain, a small tree had fallen from outside the fenced area into the pen, acting like a bridge. My cousins and I had double-dared each other to climb the bridge. When it got to be my turn, somebody shook the limb. Not too hard—just enough for me to land in the hogs' mushy dirt.

I got it in my eight-year-old head that I wasn't moving. After I'd been out there sitting in the mud for an hour, Grandmamma came down the lane with her cane. Some time before, my uncle had sent Grandmamma a fancy cane from Liberia, and she always used it to walk to the mailbox, which was about a half mile from the house and only a couple of hundred feet from the hog pen.

When I heard her coming, I told my cousins, "Now y'all going to get it." To my surprise, instead of getting the plum switch, tearing off the bark, and giving them a beating, Grandmomma opened the gate and lit into me. She started beating me right there on the ground, until I came up out of the mud like a jack-in-the-box. Then she switched me all the way back to the house.

Stripped, crying, and soaking in the big tub on the back porch, I couldn't figure out why she had done this to me. "They pushed me," I cried.

She finally said, "Sandra, it doesn't matter if you ended up in the mud because you were pushed, you accidentally fell, or you just got it in your head to jump in. It only matters that you get up." "But that's not fair," I cried. She responded, "Fair ain't got nothing to do with it. When you down, you got to get up. You got to pull yourself up, and just like getting out of that hog pen, it might be slippery, you might stumble and fall again, but you got to keep getting up."

Suddenly, I realized that all the bad articles, media coverage, half-truths, and misrepresentations of the facts had put me back in the hog pen. Right then I knew I had to get up!

It took a few months to salvage something of our lives. My husband and I cut our losses and eventually moved to another city, where we reestablished ourselves. But our persistence and hope had carried us through.

HAMS AND TURKEYS

Billy Mitchell

I'm often asked where I got my passion for advocacy. It came in part because of my grandmother, Addie Mitchell—Nannie, as her grandchildren called her. Her physical being left us three days shy of her ninety-fifth birthday, but her spirit remains to this day.