A Tale of American Armor

SCAR TISSUE

SHANNON FRISON

Scar Tissue

A Tale of American Armor

Shannon Frison

The Author's Journey
Old Hickory, TN

ISBN-13: 979-8-9988072-2-0
Library of Congress Control Number: 2025913520

Book cover design by Global.Dezine
The Author's Journey Publishing Co.
Journey Imprint
Old Hickory, TN

Preface

Trial and Error

I knew she would be kicked out of the Navy with a dishonorable discharge. She knew that too. But my goal was to represent her at the court-martial, save her life, and keep her out of the Brig. What I didn't know was that I would face another run-in with racial bias. As a Black woman living in America and graduating from Harvard University, it was something I was already all too familiar with. Still, I didn't expect to face it while arguing a case in court.

During this time, I was a solo practitioner. In my previous career journey, I was a civilian prosecutor for the state of Massachusetts. I served as a judge advocate in the Marine Corps, and prior to that, I worked for a law firm in Boston doing litigation. So I had been several years removed from military life when this case came across my desk.

I thought I knew everything about that life. After all, I had been on active duty and held the rank of Major in the Marine Corps—a mid-level officer responsible for managing operations and people. Many

civilians don't realize that officers and enlisted members operate on entirely different rank structures. Technically, the lowest officer outranks the most senior enlisted Marine, but anyone who's seen a Sergeant Major in action knows respect isn't about rank alone.

Still, for all my experience, nothing prepared me for what I learned while defending this sailor: how deeply gang activity had infiltrated even the military. Even the disciplined ranks of the Marine Corps weren't immune.

My client was a Black woman who held the title of Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, the highest-ranking non-commissioned officer in the branch. That is a serious achievement. The title serves as the voice for all enlisted sailors and advises top Navy leadership on their needs, challenges, and morale. And she was married to a Marine. His pregnant mistress was also a Marine. The man she allegedly persuaded to murder her mistress was, too, a Marine. And they were *all* stationed in Okinawa, Japan.

The Navy had charged her with conspiracy to murder, alleging that she had planned to murder her husband's pregnant mistress, as well as a slew of other

offenses. I flew back and forth to Japan six times that year. Two of those trips were on behalf of my client; the others were on behalf of another Marine.

As an independent lawyer, I managed every aspect of that general court-martial on my own. The military trial setting has many rules that may be unfamiliar to civilians, including civilian lawyers. First, your presence is always required. That was the reason I made so many trips to Japan during my time in solo practice. For my client, I needed to make sure we prepared her for her testimony, prepared her for sentencing, drafted questions for each witness (including her husband, NCIS officers, and investigators), wrote motions, and conducted motions practice to try to reduce the charges or the strength of the charges, conducted voir dire and challenged members (jurors) who should not sit on the trial, and opened, closed, and managed my client's expectations about the possible outcome. All while suffering from jet lag and reacclimating to Japanese culture and life for a few weeks. And acclimatizing to the heat of Okinawa. It was powerfully hot. And the humidity was worse. All that, in addition to coordinating travel back and forth to Japan

to defend someone who looked like me—someone likely facing the most serious trouble of her life—was both terrifying and invigorating, providing quite the education for a hungry defense lawyer.

My client was accused of plotting the mistress' murder with members of a street gang called the Crips (she and her husband had many friends who were members). In fact, the government believed she had orchestrated a "virtual hit" via phone and email to direct members of the Crips to shoot the mistress while she was at a Circle K store in North Carolina. The prosecution posited that while my client and her husband were in Okinawa, the plan spanned back to the United States and abroad, with coordination happening in Iraq and North Carolina via email. Fortunately, the Crip members assigned to carry out this hit backed out because the intended victim had a child with her at the time. No blood was shed in the end.

Therefore, the Navy planned to prosecute her for the alleged failed assassination attempt. When I first met her, I saw a Black woman close to my age who had been emotionally abused, cheated on, humiliated, and harassed by a pregnant mistress. And she was finally

trying to gain control of her life. But the members of the court-martial wove a story of infidelity and revenge, linking her romantically to the Crips gang member through a string of emails. To say the least, it was a very difficult case to defend.

The commanding officer selects the jury in a court-martial, which includes service members at and above the accused's rank. For my client's trial, they were largely, if not all, men. And they were predominantly, if not exclusively, Caucasian. The jurors ranged in rank from senior enlisted to full-bird colonel. The colonel was considered the senior member and, like all things military, ran the jury with added responsibility for guiding the group and ensuring procedures are followed.

The trial took place at the Joint Law Center on Camp Foster in Okinawa, Japan. The building was stark The atmosphere was impersonal, and the courtroom felt cold and looming, much like the legal process itself. I had been there before, but never in this capacity. I was nervous but excited, too. My client was seated next to me. She looked scared but strong. At the table next to us was the prosecutor, referred to as a "trial counsel" in

military terminology. I knew him from my years on active duty as a judge advocate. In fact, I had served alongside him on the very military base where the trial took place. All the jury members sat in a box to our left. My defense and my client were well-prepared, but like most trials, you never know what might happen.

From the elevated bench directly in front of us, the military judge presided over the courtroom. I also knew him from my time prosecuting in the Corps, specifically in Okinawa. This would be my first time appearing in front of him as a civilian attorney representing a servicemember. Marines and sailors have the option of hiring their own privately retained counsel for criminal matters. That day, it was me. There's a well-known saying among lawyers: a good lawyer knows the law. A great lawyer knows the judge. Despite everything that was stacked against her, my client was in good hands.

As a lawyer, you brace yourself for the twists and turns that come with a trial, but nothing prepares you for being put on trial yourself. The senior member of the jury asked the judge, "I'd like to know if the tattoos her lawyer has are gang-related." I couldn't

believe he asked that about *me*. The lawyer who traveled 7,500 miles to defend this servicemember. The lawyer who dedicated more than a year of work preparing for trial. Above all else, the lawyer who was also a United States Marine. How dare he mistake me for a gang member, someone who did not go to Harvard, did not excel, and did not follow the straight and righteous path to success in this country. How dare he not even recognize that he was talking to a Marine officer just two ranks below himself. He saw me—Black. He saw my client—Black. He saw her husband—Black. He saw the alleged victim—Black. He saw the alleged co-conspiring gang members—Black. And that was all.

This was also my first experience with tattoo bias—and to put it mildly, I was mortified. Horrified. He could barely see the tip of a tattoo on my clavicle. Seriously? At the time, I didn't have nearly as many tattoos as I do now—and certainly not enough for anyone to be commenting on in a courtroom. Quite frankly, his accusation was ridiculous. The combination of gang violence, Black people, and tattoos created its own special brew of racism, stereotypes, and prejudices.

This meant that defending the trial would be even more difficult.

Despite the attack on my character, I maintained my composure. I was there to work. I was there to save this other stellar Black woman from charges, from military prison, from racism, from chauvinism, from everything that I had wanted someone to save *me* from.

Luckily (and I do mean plain old luck), the military judge saw the moment for what it was. Without answering the senior member's question about my tattoos, the judge quickly dismissed him from the jury. Upon the jurors' release for the day, only the judge, prosecutor, and I remained. When we brought up that ridiculous question from the colonel, we all exploded into raucous, belly-rolling, knee-slapping laughter. But beneath my laughter was a still and stagnant sadness. Despite my achievements and skills in my craft, I still felt like "just" a suspicious Black woman at the end of the day.

It was a long and arduous trial, and eventually my client and I made it out of Okinawa intact but not unscathed. The evidence had been stacked against her. To add fuel to the fire, her husband had recently been

convicted in a Japanese court for a near-deadly assault on a Japanese national. He was serving an eight-year prison sentence. The investigation also implicated other service members allegedly affiliated with the Crips. A series of sultry, revealing emails to the gang member she was accused of contracting painted my client as an angry, vengeful, and scorned wife who had allegedly been romantically involved with the Marine she asked to kill the mistress. It was a complicated set of relationships amongst these young servicemembers. But my only interest in the whole affair was getting my client *out* of it.

Despite this mountain of evidence against her, none of it proved she was guilty of conspiracy. As a result, she was acquitted of most charges but convicted of a minor offense and dishonorably discharged from the Navy. As awful as that sounds, it was a true victory. She would not go to the Brig. She would remain free.

As for me, my pride was hurt, eyes opened, and armor hardened. I left the courtroom with a mission. I was determined not to let racism color my defense of anyone charged with crimes. I wanted to turn bias on its head through my work and my advocacy.

As I stepped outside the Joint Law Center with my client, the heat swallowed us whole. Okinawa is tropically hot, the kind of heat that clings to you, soaks your clothes, and forces your body to adjust. But that day, the heat wasn't just in the air. The heat that I felt rising within me originated from the air-conditioned courtroom, intensified by the sting of bias and the quiet resolve that settled in my chest as I walked to my car. My client and her sister, who was also a sailor, smiled and thanked me before I climbed into my rental car. I left Okinawa with a mission: to defend my clients without letting racism distort the way I fight for them and to expose that bias through the power of the law itself.

We left that day with no visible bruises, no blood, and no broken bones; but still, we left wounded. The kind of wounds that don't scream. The kind that settle deep under the skin, attach to the muscle, and harden over time. Racism, humiliation, and betrayal don't always manifest outwardly. Occasionally, they sit quietly in your body and make a home. My body tells that story. It's marked by tattoos I chose later in life and by scars I never asked for, some of them etched into me

before I could even speak. This book is about those marks. The ones I carry in silence. The ones that shaped me. The ones that remind me how even when you do everything "right," you're still not safe. Not in this country.

We were raised to believe in the great American Dream. In our twenties and thirties, we believed in the formula: work hard, follow the rules, get the degrees, buy the house, shake the right hands. We believed acceptance would follow. But by the time we reach our forties and fifties, we realize it was all an exercise in futility. We played by the rules, and still, we were cut. Again and again. But, somehow, we're still here. That's the thing about scar tissue. It forms where the injury occurred, but it becomes both your armor and your teacher. A warning, a protection, and a map. A way to move through a world that sees your skin before your soul. A way to survive these United States.

That's why I wrote this book. Because I know I'm not the only one carrying these kinds of scars. Because I have spent a lifetime watching brilliant, dedicated people follow every rule only to be pushed aside, questioned, or erased. I wrote this for the ones

who were told they didn't belong even when they were overqualified. I wrote this for those who swallowed their pain just to make it through the day. I wrote this for the professionals who work twice as hard and still get asked if they belong in the room.

I wrote this now because silence no longer serves me. And I hope that in reading this, you feel seen, you feel truth rise up in your story, and you find strength in the marks you have carried too long in silence.

Childhood

Scars of Origin

Me, My Grandfather, and Cousin Tyrone in my grandfather's yard, Mississippi

May The Road Rise Up To Meet You

Jessie Mae Frison. At the risk of echoing the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, I must embrace the contradiction: her funeral was both majestic and devastating. A day of beauty and heartbreak. So many people. So many people. Not just family, but friends, some of whom I, the oldest granddaughter, had never met. Old and young, men and women, working and unemployed, healthy and frail. Each face drew me back to a moment when my grandmother, Jessie Mae Frison, was still alive.

It was June of 2000. I had literally just left active duty, having completed my tour of duty in the Marine Corps. I woke up with a headache and a nervous stomach to keep it company. Everyone in the house showered and dressed like any other Sunday on our way to Antioch Baptist Church on the border of Courtland and Pope, Mississippi. It is a small church in a rural area. Nothing is next to it, and the only thing across the street from it is the graveyard. The building is old, has only one level, and smells like old Bibles and wooden pews. Yeah, there was air conditioning, but some days it didn't feel like it. Antioch had a small congregation of faithful

attendees, a Black male pastor, a familiar choir, and a warm atmosphere. Every time I stepped into that church, I thought, “This must be how it felt to go to church as a slave in the United States.” I imagined our ancestors taking all their swords and shields, all their worries and fears, all the weight of servitude to the altar. Even though they were bound to the fields—this one day, this one hour, they felt free.

The night before, I had sat down on the couch across from my grandfather, and he asked, “How you, Jib?” My grandfather calls me Jib. I don’t even know how I got that nickname. But, from my granddaddy, just about everyone got a nickname. So ‘Leen, Jack, Poncho, Buck, Snake, Brownskin, Tootsie, Pig, etc. are all nicknames for folks in my family. And don’t try not answering to your nickname. Ain’t gonna work. When I’d call and tell him it was Shannon on the phone, he’d have no idea it was me. My name is “Jib.”His “Jib.”

I responded, “I’m alright, I guess.”

And he said, “Well, everyday aint gon’ be Sunday…” It was his way of saying life won’t always be easy or sweet. Some days come with grief, with

heartache, with the kind of heaviness that can't be prayed away.

Then Granddaddy went on to talk about how he and Grandmomma knew that they would have to leave each other one day.

"We all gotta do what she did—go on away from here."

I just sat there and nodded in affirmation, knowing that his pain was 55 years greater than my own, wondering how he could be so strong. Then again, 'strong' doesn't even capture the kind of fortitude he passed down to all of us, like the way he used to toss each of us a silver dollar for candy, easy and sure, like it was second nature.

At 11:30 a.m., my grandmother's house welcomed the entire family from Mississippi, Memphis, North Dakota, Chicago, and St. Louis. My grandmother's house is the "home house." The entire Frison family congregated at this house for everything important: Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays, anniversaries, reunions, meetings, crises, and fellowship. Just about all of my aunts and uncles have lived in that house and

returned to it in times of trouble. It is now my mother's house.

Like many in our family and across the South, it is a Jim Walter home. The house is small, old, and in need of repairs, but it remains ours. My mom and at least four of my aunts in Mississippi still live in theirs, all paid off after years of hard, steady work. One aunt told me she bought hers as a shell, just the framed walls. That was all Jim Walter provided to Black families in Mississippi. No electricity. No plumbing. No insulation. No heating or air. She had to add all of that herself.

As a child spending summers in Mississippi, I often heard people say, "That's a Jim Walter house," without knowing what it meant. I do now. After World

War II, Jim Walter Homes sold affordable shell houses that were often the only path to homeownership for Black families in the South, especially returning Black veterans who were shut out by discriminatory laws and lending practices. The workmanship was not perfect, and making them livable took time and money, but for families like my grandfather's, it was a rare chance to set down roots and call something their own. That house has held decades of our laughter, our arguments, our prayers, and our grief. It stood with us again on the day we gathered to say goodbye. So many people came that the walls could not hold us. We filled the yard, crowded onto the porch, and crossed the road to where my grandfather keeps his cows, hogs, chickens, and goats.

Almost everyone was dressed in black. Standing in the yard, I beheld my wonderful and close-knit family. A proud family. I marveled at a cousin, uncle, niece whom I had not seen in so long and the fact that we were all there together. However, each time my heart swelled with joy at the reunion, I felt a knot in my stomach as I was reminded, "...but consider the reason for our gathering; Grandmomma has passed away." It was majestic, yes, but it was the worst day of my life.

We finally made it to the church, and I walked inside. It still smelled the same and gave the same familiar feeling. Even that day. Sitting on the left were friends, and the pews on the right were reserved for us. At the altar was a white casket, and inside was a woman who lived 73 years for her God, her husband, and her 12 children. My legs buckled as each pair of us stopped briefly at the casket. Grandmomma wore a white dress and a magnificent white hat. She loved hats. As my sister, Jaime, and I got closer, I grabbed her hand for strength so that I would not fall or double over. She seemed to be sleeping, but I knew better. My stomach did flips and somersaults and danced, and that movement was the only thing that kept my legs from becoming icy cold.

Finally, Jaime and I stepped up to the casket. It was Jessie Mae Frison, looking good as usual. When I visited her in the hospital a few months prior, she was small, her hands bowed by atrophy, unresponsive, with machines barely keeping her tethered to this side of life. I wanted God to take her then because I knew she was suffering. But today she looked as if she had gotten up, gotten dressed, and headed to a Mother's Day service,

an occasion when all of the church mothers and elders wore all white.

It was a struggle not to run out of the church. My great uncle gave a touching eulogy, but I faded in and out of it as my eyes drifted back and forth from my grandmother to my mother to my screaming great aunt. I cannot tell you how long the service lasted. I can only tell you that it was too short. Too short before the mortician closed the casket and made it the last time I would ever see her again. My knees and ankles, shins and toes, weakened as they rolled her out of the church into the tent. The preacher said words that I could not hear as I searched for my mother. I had to find her and hold her. She held my sister close to her and said, “Say goodbye,” through her tears as they lowered the casket into the ground. My aunt Emma burst into tears, and she was gone. I watched in awe as the workers covered the grave. I thought, “No, no, I must get her out of there.” But I could not.

When we got back to the house, I sat with my grandfather. He said, “Every Sunday I carry her to church and carry her back to the house. Today, we went to church, but I couldn’t bring her back…”

The day after her funeral, I did not say much to Granddaddy. I would not have been able to speak even if words had come to me. As the eldest child, I watched my mother very closely to ensure that she did not fall if her knees became too weak from grief.

That house, like the land it stands on, has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Looking around at the faces on the porch and in the yard after the funeral, I was reminded of my earliest years here, when I was a country baby on my grandparents' knee.

Country Beginnings

My mom had me when she was 24 years old. She had moved to Chicago as part of the Second Great Migration. Everyone Black in Chicago is basically from Mississippi. When she had me, she immediately brought me to the Sip and handed me over to my grandparents until I was old enough to attend school.

For those first few years, I grew up in the country, close to my grandparents. I spent my days on my granddaddy's knee, following him as he hauled wood in the hot sun, hanging out in the cornfields, playing with animals on the farm, and riding go-carts,

bikes, and anything else with wheels. I loved the smell, taste, and sound of the South. Even after my mother took me to Chicago for preschool, I returned every summer.

Being raised by my grandparents meant I was raised by Mississippi sharecroppers. I learned the value of an honest day's work as well as the unspoken rules of the South. I know how to shell peas and make cha cha, a Southern preserved relish made with green tomatoes, cabbage, and peppers. I learned to stay away from sundown towns and how to survive when the odds are stacked against you. In Mississippi, Black folks have had to thrive against impossible odds every single day.

As a child, I never felt that my situation was bad. I never felt poor or disadvantaged. We had what we needed and could do what we wanted. I didn't notice the Mississippi segregation I was living in. I was surrounded by Black folks, in a mostly Black part of Panola County, wrapped in the love of a big family.

Yet, my grandparents bore scars from that life. My granddaddy walked with a slight hitch, one leg a little longer than the other from childhood polio. My grandmother walked with the deliberate pace of a

woman who had birthed twelve children and endured a lifetime of Southern medicine. They also carried the scars of a medical system that never valued Black bodies, from the Tuskegee Experiment to forced hysterectomies to Henrietta Lacks. For that reason, they taught us to protect our bodies and heal ourselves with what we had.

It Ain't Chicago

Life in Mississippi was different. My grandparents raised children in the 1940s and 50s, often under the crushing weight of sharecropping. Sharecropping was presented as a step forward from slavery, but in reality, it was a system designed to keep Black families poor, landless, and dependent on white landowners. Families rented small plots of land and, in exchange for working them, owed a portion of their harvest to the landowner. The landowner also "loaned" the seeds, mules, tools, and supplies, often at inflated prices, so that by the time the harvest was over, families owed more than they had earned.

It was a never-ending cycle of debt. My mother and aunts told me they moved constantly because my

grandfather's ability to keep a roof over their heads depended on the quality of the land he was given, the mood of the white landowner, and the weather. Sometimes it was not even about the land or the crop. One season, my grandfather was put out for registering to vote. That was the level of control these landowners had. They could take away your home, your livelihood, and your stability simply because you tried to exercise your rights.

The cruelty of sharecropping did not end in the past. Even into the 1990s, white landowners and local officials used the same principles to keep Black farmers in economic bondage. Access to land, credit, and fair equipment prices was controlled by the same families who had been running things for generations. Black farmers were often denied bank loans unless they agreed to sell their crops through white-owned gins at unfair prices. Others were promised better land "next season" if they worked harder, a promise that was rarely kept. The mechanics had changed just enough to make it look legal, but the purpose was the same: keep us working, keep us poor, and keep us from building wealth we could pass on.

During the fall of 2022, my cousin and I picked some cotton in Panola County, Mississippi, for my use as a decoration at my house. When we pulled these stalks out of the ground, not many of the buds had opened. My cousin, Bernardo, told me to set them in water overnight, then take them out and let them dry in the sun. In a day or two, the rest of the buds opened, just like he said they would. Why does my 50-year-old cousin know so much about cotton? He oversaw the entire cotton gin for years in Pope, Mississippi. I am proud of that and of him. We lead completely different lives in different states, yet I have so much respect for the skills he mastered: welding, cotton gins, horse breaking, and more things I would not know the first thing about. I am proud of him and of my whole family for surviving and thriving, producing, and reproducing in a hostile environment.

I have always felt lucky to be a Frison, part of an amazing family. I spent my life toggling between the city and the country. I preferred the country, but I needed the opportunities the city offered. Moving between the two shaped me differently than if I had grown up in only one. Now I keep cotton stalks displayed in my home as art, a reminder for me and for anyone who walks through my door of our shared legacy of bondage and survival.

"King Cotton" was a slogan used before the Civil War by Southern secessionists to claim that cotton made the South so economically powerful that it could thrive independently from the North. They believed that controlling cotton exports would force Britain and France to support the Confederacy militarily because their economies depended on Southern cotton. That theory failed, but cotton's role in the enslavement, servitude, and oppression of Black people in the South is undeniable. Even today, white people own 97 percent of cotton fields and their profits.

For all that labor, my family gained no lasting stability. We were poor. The little money they made went toward finishing the house, on top of feeding their

children. Even then, we remained lower class in Panola County. The grand homes in Batesville stood in sharp contrast to ours: mansion against shanty.

No one talks enough about the moment you realize you are part of the neglected class in this country. That realization hits people differently. Some turn to crime, some work harder, some give up entirely. But shame is common to us all.

For me, that feeling became fuel. I refused to be trapped in the lower class in a country that claimed everyone could succeed. I knew I had too much to offer the world. My family encouraged me, even when they did not fully understand my path. In the Frison family, if you were good at something, we pushed you to do it to the fullest. I never let the sight of our houses compared to white mansions make me feel inferior. It pushed me to excel at what I was best at. I was physically fit and a natural leader, so the Marine Corps was a good choice for me. I was an avid reader and thinker with a strong sense of justice, so law fit me as well. I may not have known then exactly how I could fight inequities and disparities, but I knew my life's journey would matter to me, my family, and Black people as a whole.

Growing up poor between Chicago and Mississippi meant growing up fast. I was the eldest of two girls, living with our mother in a small apartment on the South Side of Chicago. I was a tomboy, a reader, a natural athlete, a leader, and a budding scholar. When you are poor, you learn about life sooner. You worry about money sooner. You start working sooner. You learn how to help run the home and care for siblings sooner. There is little time for coddling or the luxury of an untroubled childhood.

Despite our meager resources, the grammar school I attended, Adam Clayton Powell Elementary, was pro-Black, true-history teaching, supportive, and nurturing. My overachievement began early, with public speaking at the end of kindergarten. In Chicago, we had kindergarten graduations. At the time, I was attending a Catholic school (though I was not Catholic), where discipline was strict and sometimes harsh. It was not unusual to get whacked on the knuckles with a ruler for giving the wrong answer.

One day toward the end of the school year, my teacher called me to her desk. I thought, “What did I do now?” I walked up in dread, expecting punishment.

Instead, she handed me a sheet of paper and told me she wanted me—me—to say the Pledge of Allegiance at our graduation. I was filled with pride and took on the assignment eagerly. Nightly in our small South Side apartment, I practiced with my mother. By the time graduation came, she was probably tired of hearing it, but she attended the graduation to hear it again. She was proud and encouraged me to do well.

By graduation day, I had it memorized cold. But when I arrived at the school auditorium, my stomach turned, and I became nauseous. I ran to the bathroom and vomited just moments before my turn. I thought, "Oh no, this is going to ruin everything." It did not. My mother helped me clean up, and I marched right out and delivered a flawless Pledge of Allegiance to the audience. Thirty-two years later, I found myself in the same position—dressed up, seconds away from an important speech, and sick to my stomach. This time, it was in Suffolk County Superior Court in Boston, just before my closing argument in the biggest murder trial the city had seen in decades.

My school years were otherwise uneventful, and I applied myself to my studies. I graduated

valedictorian from Hyde Park Career Academy in 1988 and left Chicago for college. I had applied to four schools, Harvard among them. When I received my acceptance letter, I was amazed and thrilled. Not many students from my high school applied to Ivy League schools, but I did.

If I was going to be someone who could create change and whose journey would matter to Black people, I needed a strong foundation, one that would open doors, get attention, and stand as an unassailable qualification. I had to aim higher, take bigger steps, and go after opportunities my peers might never consider. I had to do more than my parents and family before me had done. I applied because I believed I was good enough to go to Harvard, and why wouldn't they take me? I was an anomaly, as I would be many more times in my career. I could not wait to see what life was like on that big, world-renowned campus. Harvard turned out to be the time of my life in so many ways.

Looking back, every part of my childhood, from the red dirt roads and cotton fields of Mississippi to the cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago, was part of the scar tissue that shaped me. It gave me the

hunger to push forward, the courage to walk into rooms I had never imagined for myself, and the determination to make my journey matter.

Me as a high school student leaning against the tree in my grandfather's yard, Mississippi