Voices of OKLAHOMA

Ernestine Dillard

Her passionate, award-winning voice has taken her across the globe and brought joy and comfort to many.

Chapter 01—1:11
Introduction

Announcer: Ernestine Dillard of Bixby, Oklahoma, is perhaps best remembered for her April 23, 1995, performance when she electrified eleven thousand mourners in a national television audience with her vocal arrangement of "God Bless America," closing the Oklahoma City Memorial Service honoring the victims of the Murrah Building bombing.

In 1994, Ernestine Dillard ended a thirty-three-year career as a registered nurse, the last two years with the Tulsa County Health Department, to pursue music full time. That same year Dillard won the American Traditions Competition at Savannah On Stage, an annual music festival in Georgia City.

Her performance career since then has included concert appearances in Geneva, Switzerland, the American Cathedral in Paris, the US Military Academy at West Point, Philadelphia's Let Freedom Ring celebration featuring General Colin Powell, the 1996 and '97 Turner Broadcasting Trumpet Awards in Atlanta, Georgia, and many other prestigious events.

Ernestine has received further awards and honors because of her community service and work with children. Listen to Ernestine's story, which eventually led to her singing at the 1995 Oklahoma City Memorial Service on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 02—10:10
Ernestine's Family

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is February 6, 2014. Ernestine, would you state your full name please?

Ernestine Dillard: Ernestine Dillard.

JE: Your date of birth?

ED: August 25, 1941.

JE: Which makes your present age?

ED: Seventy-two.

JE: I should say on this date, February 6, it's nine degrees. It's been snowing, snow's on the ground but nothing keeps us from doing this. We're recording this interview in the recording facilities here of *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Ernestine, were you named after somebody?

ED: I was named after my father and my mother. It's interesting my name, I'm glad you asked me that because my name was something else when I was first born. My dad was not there, for whatever reason he was not there, and when he did get there he decided he wanted me named for him. So I have part of his name, which is Ernest. He's Ernest Harris. And my mother was Christine. So I am Ernestine.

JE: Where were you born?

ED: I was born in Nesbit, Mississippi. It's a small town; it's a northern Mississippi town. Most of the people in that community were related to me either on my father's side or my mother's side. It was a large community because we have a large family. You could knock on almost any door and find a cousin or uncle or aunt or something. Some of them I'm not sure if they really were natural relatives or it was just our aunt in the community.

JE: Made it a comfortable community then, environment.

ED: It was, it was. Still is, actually. A lot of the land—it's amazing to me that these people, these families, owned their own land at that time. Nesbit was pretty much owned by the extended family that we have. A lot of land has been sold now to people who love suburban living. And not so much of my family is there, but I still have quite a bit of brothers and sisters there.

JE: Your mother's name?

ED: Christine Yarbrough Harris. She was a Yarbrough before she married.

JE: Where was she from?

ED: She was there in Nesbit too. She was very young when she and my father married. She was fifteen years old, and I suppose that wasn't young back then to be married at fifteen, you know. But her mother had died when she was nine, so she had pretty much been raised by her oldest sister. My grandfather had remarried and I don't think that was a happy relationship that she had with her stepmother. The years have shown that there were not good feelings there, but she was married early, lived there in Nesbit with her husband at that time, who was my father.

JE: And what was his name?

ED: His name was Ernest Harris. He was, you know, the proverbial jack-of-all-trades, but I think he was mastering a lot of them as well because he was a builder, he built homes. He was a farmer, he had a really lucrative farm. He was a barber and he had a little shop in the town

of Hernando, which was a little bit south, I would say maybe about twenty miles south of Nesbit. On the weekends he went down and opened his shop and he cut hair. And it was an interesting place to be.

In addition to that, he was a blue's singer who played guitar, quite well too.

JE: So this is where you picked up your music you think?

ED: Some of it, I think. Um, I think my mother, her family sang too, you know. Singing was such an integral part of what we did as a family so everybody pretty much sang, at some level, you know, professional level or whether it was just for entertainment.

But my dad sang for parties. As a little girl I remember they had shows that came in. You know, the minstrel shows and all that. We weren't supposed to see them but we would sneak in under the tent and peak. So I think about my childhood, it was very, very colorful, to say the least. My dad played the guitar for a lot of different parties and things like that.

JE: Oh minstrel shows, you might talk what they were, and why was it you weren't supposed to see them?

ED: Well, minstrel shows were shows were entertainers would come with tents and they would dancing and singing. Who knows what else, we didn't see everything that went on in there, but it was a form of entertainment when they had picnics. And these picnics were not just like you take your family and go out on a picnic, it was a large gathering, more like a party, you know, celebration for the weekend. And these traveling minstrels or singers or dancers would come and set up their tent and that was part of the entertainment.

The reason we were not as children supposed to see them, families kind of protected children from seeing things that they thought were not good, healthy things for them to see at that age. Music was one thing in church and they sort of steered us toward that, even though they were partying on the weekend they didn't want us there. And they had something else set aside for us, but we'd sneak away from whatever they had prepared for us and go and watch these shows. And they probably had some risqué stuff in there, you know—

JE: Yeah.

ED: ...that we didn't need to see.

JE: Your mother's personality, what was she like?

ED: As a young woman she was joyful. She had a lot of humor that carried her through lot of difficult times. My mother was a hairstylist, that's what we call them now, but they were kitchen hairdressers, is what they were. They didn't require licenses so many of the ladies would gather in on weekend and get their hair done. She was good at that. And you would hear them laughing and joking and she loved jokes. She loved to play.

I remember her even playing with us as teenagers, on the floor and telling jokes and telling stories and things like that.

JE: So your father was a busy man. What was his personality like?

ED: I always say my dad was a ladies' man. They were just fun-loving people. I think he was a bit promiscuous with ladies, that's the impression I get of him as an adult, you know. He was quite handsome.

My mother was a very pretty woman. I'm not responsible for their choices, but he had a way with ladies, I think.

JE: Was that a conflict then in the family? Or did you sense that as you were a child?

ED: I was very young when they parted. They parted when I was two, and I think the precipitating thing was his ability to woo the ladies. And my mom was a very determined woman. She just wasn't going to share him with anybody, so I think she just left. There was no physical violence or anything like that, that's the thing I'm thankful for.

And after they were separated it was very interesting to me that they became lifelong friends. They died within a few months of each other and they had not been married since I was two years old. And when they died I was in my forties.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

ED: There are tons of us because we had the split family. There are seventeen of us. I have sixteen siblings, two of which died young, but the rest of us are still alive and doing well. The family is so blended that the ones that who are not biologically related, they are connected in a very, very warm sense. There's never been any conflict of that nature.

There are three of us born to my father and my mother, my brother who is older than I, I am in the middle, and then I have a sister that is younger than I. We're the older three and each group of children after that my father remarried and my mother remarried. There is a group of children and each year each one of them had a child almost at the same time. So that's why we have so many siblings. But all of us are very close.

JE: Do you have reunions where you've ever gotten—

ED: No. We've had gatherings when it was necessary for us to be together, whether it was a memorial service, a funeral, or special occasion. But when I go to Memphis or in that area, we just kind of get together.

JE: Um.

ED: So we don't plan anything. We've told some of the younger people to please plan a reunion, but we've not been able to do that, unfortunately.

JE: What is the first house you recollect as a child? And what was that like?

ED: The first house I remember is that of my aunt, the one that helped to raise my mother. She was more or less like a grandmother. She never had children. She did raise my baby sister that was next to me, not the younger ones, but the one that was next to me. She kept her with her all the time because she was a baby when my mom left my dad. But that's her home and her home was like, you know, they called them in those days "shotgun houses." It was a straight-through house.

I remember her and my uncle having this wooden house, it was part of a sharecropper's farm. I think they did fairly well. My uncle was a person who carved furniture. He could do very well with that, so most of everything in their home he had made. I've seen it since I've been an adult and I looked at the workmanship and it was fantastic.

JE: And on the shotgun house, what was the floor plan? Was it the living room—

ED: It was the living room, the bedroom, and the kitchen—

JE: All—

ED: Straight ahead.

JE: Straight ahead. So they called them shotgun you could just shoot a shotgun right through the middle—

ED: Right.

JE: ...and not hit anything.

ED: That's right, that's right.

JE: Right. But that was the norm then for your people.

ED: Absolutely. I'll be honest, we didn't feel deprived because my uncle again and my father were good farmers. They always managed to provide more than just enough, so we were not the suffering children as some were who didn't have quite enough.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: I remember always having plenty of fresh vegetables and meat and things like that. As a child growing up I don't ever feel deprived. There might have been one or two days with my mom that we were not sure if she was going to find something to bring in, but mostly on a whole we were adequately taken care of.

Chapter 03—8:40
Early Singing

John Erling: Your first school, what was that?

Ernestine Dillard: Whenever you were big enough to go you walked to school. And you know the old thing about "I walked five miles to school"? Well, we actually did walk a long distance to this little schoolhouse. And I remember learning to read, and a lot of that was taught at home. You learned to spell your name and how to read and say your ABCs and how to count and all of that. You were taught that at home when you learned to speak or whatever.

JE: So was that being taught by your aunt?

ED: Yes. And any adult that had charge over you at that time. My aunt was basically the one that did the most of the teaching as we grew up. She did those kinds of things.

My first regular school was in Memphis and it was kindergarten. And I remember it was Miss Potts's kindergarten in South Memphis. I went in already knowing how to read and write and to spell my name and all of that, so I guess, I was doing fairly well at being taught, you know.

JE: You're talking about like five years old?

ED: Uh, five and less. I would think I was reading earlier because I was reading before I went to kindergarten. I went to kindergarten at five.

JE: At that point, had you already shown interest in music? Were you aware of it?

ED: I was not aware until I was about five. That's when I remember my aunt taught me my first song. And that song was "Can't No Grave Hold My Body Down." I can't imagine why they would teach a little kid that song, but to me, I was learning to sing. And I did get to sing it at church as a solo.

JE: How did that go, just a little bit?

ED: Can't no grave hold my body down. When the first trumpet sound I'll be carrying up out of the ground. Can't no grave hold my body down.

And it's interesting because I found a recording, I wanted to add it into my presentation and talk about it a bit when I was giving a sermon-song. And I discovered that there was a track, a karaoke track, with Billie Jean, the country singer. She had made a track where she said she got it when she was a young girl singing that song. She's in, I guess, Nashville, Ozarks, or wherever and I'm in Nesbit, Mississippi. Can you imagine the cultures bringing those songs together—

JE: Wow.

ED: ...when there was no TV and very little radio. So to me that's interesting how that's done.

JE: The adults obviously knew that you were specially talented at that point, you think?

ED: I think maybe they were searching and helping you to find whatever gift you had because my sister, she loved to speak and she didn't like to sing. Occasionally they would make us sing together.

But I hated to speak and I enjoyed the singing, so maybe that's what it was. Because about that time they had the old radios, you know, that you could put the wire in the ground, they call it a grounding wire, or something like that. And certain hours during the day you could get certain radio stations. And my favorite station was the old Firestone Hour. There was a woman that her name was Marguerite Piazza. She would open the old Firestone Hours with, "If I could tell you of my devotion, if I could sing all my love so true." Now I may have some of the words not quite right, but as a young person I was not in school full time so I had to be very young.

I loved that, I lived to go and listen to the old Firestone Hour, which the music was not alien to my culture but it wasn't the type of music that we sang because we did quartets

and gospel, you know, coming out of the African American heritage. So to hear that type of music I was fascinated by that.

JE: Five years old, maybe, you were listening?

ED: Five, yeah, five is when I remember having this love for music and all kinds of music.

JE: Were you going to church at this point?

ED: Yes. We were—church was always there. You had to go to church, no matter what you did on Friday and Saturday you had to go to church on Sunday. So church was a part of it. And children were not as active, they didn't have children's programs and things like that, but they would have what they called was Children's Day when we get to do whatever our gifts were. We could speak or Easter or special holidays we got to show our talent and they expected you to do well so you wouldn't embarrass the family, so—

JE: Obviously you remember performing then—

ED: Yes.

JE: ...at a very young age.

ED: Absolutely.

JE: Was that something that you wanted to do, made you nervous, didn't want to? Or how did you react?

ED: I loved to sing. I was petrified if you asked me to speak and was until I was way into adulthood. I mean, absolutely petrified. But I loved to sing and I would sing at the drop of a hat. I remember that.

As far as how the family reacted to it, they were supportive because they felt that was the way to help you be a good citizen, a good character, or whatever they were trying to build you to be a good person.

JE: Do you remember when you would sing at five or six? Did you get good feedback?

ED: Did I get good feedback? I think the feedback was primarily from family members and occasionally would say, "Well, you did real good. We're proud of you," and that kind of thing, you know. But I didn't internalize any of that at that time. I guess I must have just been, "Oh, this pleased them so I'll try and do some more."

I remember being about seven, or maybe somewhere between six and eight, I'll say. There was a young woman that came to our church. She sang and really touched my heart. It really made me want to sing forever. And I remember telling God, "I want to sing like that when I get to be grown." That's how I put it.

That stayed with me for a long time and I didn't want to sing identical to her style of singing. What I wanted was that feeling that she was giving to me. I wanted to be able to give that to someone else. And that's been a sign to me all these years that God answers my prayer because he did give me a voice that people seem to want to hear.

I'd always carried the music with me. I think maybe twelve, thirteen years old, I realized I wanted to be in medicine. My first goal was to be a doctor. And I realized that if I wanted six children, which was what my goal was, six children, and a husband, I couldn't be a doctor. And I'm thinking as an adult I'm looking at this reasoning from an almost teenage girl saying, "I can't be a doctor because that's going to take a lot of my time from my family. And if I'm going to have six children I'm going to need to be around. So I think I'll be a nurse."

Consequently, I became a registered nurse, later on. And the music and the medicine have always come along together.

JE: Were you performing in school all those years and became known that Ernestine is a singer by this time, right?

ED: Yes, yes. I always sang in school in every level. In the fourth grade I sang with groups and fifth grade and sixth grade. Seventh and eighth grade it was junior high for us, and I had a wonderful music teacher. She was very strict.

I remember once I was singing my harmony incorrectly and she gave me one more chance to sing it correctly. And she was going to crack me on my knuckles. So I tried it again and I still got it wrong. The way I was getting it wrong was just so funny to me, so when she swatted me I started laughing and crying at the same time, 'cause it was just so funny. And I remember the song, the line was, "Shepherds abiding in the field." I was supposed to sing the harmony and I never could get the alto right. If you can imagine me singing alto all my life? I did until I was fully adult. I sang alto or second soprano, never that soprano line.

But anyway, that was so much fun growing up with good teachers who wanted the best for you and they got it no matter what it cost you.

JE: So this was school through high school in Memphis?

ED: Yes in Memphis.

Chapter 04—6:20
Racism

John Erling: What else is going on in the community? You're African American, can you go back to your earliest recollection of not being treated as everyone else was treated?

Ernestine Dillard: You know, I remember reading a book by Clifton Tombull and I was so happy with the way he handled that question of how we grew up. I agree with him 100 percent that our families were able somehow to keep us covered and shielded so much from the brunt of the terrible racism.

And on the other hand, as an adult, I realized that there were some good people in all cultures. So we didn't get quite as much.

I know some things happened, as a matter of fact, my uncle had to finally leave. Hernando, Mississippi, is where they, my aunt and uncle lived, just a little bit south of Nesbit. He had to finally leave because he had a verbal altercation with the man who owned the dairy farm where he worked and they threatened to kill him. So he had to leave and finally moved to Memphis. That was a latter thing.

But in spite of all of that, I didn't really notice the severe racism in the sense of people overtly saying ugly things to you just because. I did know that we could not drink from certain fountains or we couldn't go to certain bathrooms. There were so many things that we couldn't do. You couldn't say certain things.

I had an instance, I think probably nine or ten years old, and I had learned something from my teacher, which was if you're talking to someone that you say, "Yes, Miss So-and-So," or "No, Miss So-and-So," and don't say, "Yes'm," you don't say that "Yes'm," thing that you're saying. So I learned it and I wanted to go and practice it.

So I was in Mississippi, and went into this little drugstore where we went all the time to get ice cream. I got an ice cream cone and I think the lady said something to me and I said, "Yes," and she immediately got my aunt and told her that I needed to be disciplined because I was sassing her because I did not say, "Yes, ma'am, Miss," whatever her name was.

My aunt told me, she said, "You cannot do that. You get in trouble," you know. She even scolded me for not.

And I told her, "My teacher told me."

She said, "I don't care what your teacher said, you cannot do this. You can get us all in trouble."

So that was one incident as a child that I realized that something needed to change. "I just don't understand this. My teacher told me I could do this and this seems like the right thing to do."

But as I grew there were small, little, minor incidents where I just thought it was ridiculous what we were having to do. We could not try on shoes. If we want to the store we had to get our feet measured with a string and bring back the shoes. If they fit, good luck, if they didn't, too bad, give them to your next one in the line. Or if you went to the dentist's office there was a small, little room where you had to go, or the doctor's office. And those things I remember as being just, I thought they were dumb. This just doesn't make sense at all.

Or if you get on the bus you have to put your money in and then walk around in and go in the back door so you can be in the back and sit. Now that makes no sense at all, to me. And as a teenager, that's when many of the movements started. I was happy to see

that and to be a part of that part of our country growing, 'cause that's the way I look at it now. We could not continue like that, you know, being, how do you say that? Degraded or treated in that manner.

So it's amazing that someone was given the idea of how to fight this in a positive way as opposed to fighting in a negative sense. What I know as a more mature adult is that good people have to stick together and stand up for what's right. And I think a lot of what happened in the '60s is because good people stood up. Not because we want to listen to negative voices, because we need each other. Um, you have something that I need and that's my goal now. I want what you have that I need and I want to give you what I have. That way it makes us powerful. And we recognize who the real enemy is, then we know that we're not fighting each other.

JE: When you were told on the bus you buy your token and then you go to the back door—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...did it make you want to challenge the authority? Or did you come close to it? Probably in high school ages when you experienced—

ED: Probably high school. As a younger person we didn't have a lot of that to do because I was in walking distance of my community school. But as a teenager I chose to ride across town from South Memphis to North Memphis to the school that I wanted to go to. I chose because I had covenanted with myself when I was in third grade and had to leave that school, it was called Manassas High School. I had to leave that school because my parents relocated. And I said, "When I get in high school I will be back and I will graduate from this school." I made that determination.

So when I went to ninth grade I went to the principal and said that I want to come to this school and I'll ride the bus. It was unheard of because everybody went to their neighborhood school. No one did that.

His name was Mr. Hobson. He could not imagine anyone having that much school spirit. He said, "If you have that much school spirit then we're going to permit you to come over here. But if you come late one time, out you go."

JE: So then there was public transportation?

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative), public transportation. And it cost a nickel, by the way, to ride the bus one way.

JE: You thought this was dumb. You had to buy the token from the driver—

ED: Yeah.

JE: ...and then you'd walk—

ED: Walk around and get in—

JE: ...to the back.

ED: ...and come in the back door.

JE: And so I suppose after a while you just did it and that's the way it is.

ED: Yeah.

JE: And you kind of forgot about it.

ED: Yeah.

JE: It was just—

ED: You just did it because that was the way the culture was set up. And that goes for the water fountains and the bathrooms and all of the other things that we were not able to do. You just tolerated it because this is the way our life is right now.

I don't know that I ever looked for a better day or anything of that nature until I was in high school about to graduate.

JE: And you graduated when?

ED: 1960.

Chapter 05—2:45
Back of the Bus

John Erling: When did you first hear about Martin Luther King?

Ernestine Dillard: I wish I could pinpoint the time. I knew about Rosa Parks, I think, first. But I knew that there was a movement that people, they were making plans where you were to resist, passively resist these things. So in high school I had several opportunities to do that.

There were young men who were taken off one of my buses, because I wasn't the only one riding the bus to school. There were many of us getting on at certain stops. As the community changed racially you would see more of this particular race getting on than the others. Some of the young men refused to put their money in and go to the back door. And they refused to move to the back and sit down. We were stopped several times by them taken off the bus.

JE: All of you?

ED: Yes. We were taken off the bus and put on the next bus, or whatever, you know.

JE: Were you late for school then?

ED: Oh no, this was mostly in the evenings.

JE: Okay.

ED: You know, by the time everybody had gathered together and made their little plans, "Well, I'm not moving back today," that kind of thing. You know, it was sort of we're getting the edge of what was going on in Alabama, and places like that.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And they just decided that they weren't going to do it anymore so they get dragged off the bus. They were not taking them to jail at that time.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: It was just disruptive children. They would just take them off and put them on another bus, or make them walk, or whatever.

JE: In high school, what did you do for entertainment?

ED: Oh, we had football games. They had school sponsored dances. We went to the park. There was no McDonald's at that time, not in our neighborhood, anyways. So you just sort of gather around.

The boys would stand on the corner and sing, you know, that's where you get all these doo-wop groups from. They would gather in little groups, and the girls couldn't come out because most of us had parents who said, "Six o'clock, or when it starts to get dark, you're inside." And the guys would stand out under the lamplight and sing.

JE: You'd probably hear them from your house?

ED: Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. At that time we lived in what was then public housing, and it was wonderful. It was safe. The guys would stand out until time for them to go in, and sing, and they would make sure you heard it.

JE: What were some of the people that you heard on the radio that you enjoyed?

ED: I remember B. B. King a lot on the radio because he had a noontime show there at one of the local radio stations. I remember him and as far as the doo-wop groups, Frankie Valli, some of the others, I have forgotten their names.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: Some of the people like Gladys Knight and there from this one particular record company.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: I remember a lot of those people.

Chapter 06—2:40
Elvis Presley

John Erling: There was a young man by the name of Elvis Presley who came out of Memphis.

Ernestine Dillard: Oh Elvis!

JE: Yes.

ED: Absolutely.

JE: Yes, right. So was he anybody that you were interested in for his music?

ED: I loved his music. I have to say this, this is a personal thing, and I was a little bit resentful because the music that he had, it was the same music that black groups were doing. And it just skyrocketed him. And I think he even admits that a lot of his music and styling came from the black community.

JE: Right.

ED: And he was always so gracious.

JE: Right.

ED: So you can't help but love him. My favorite song he did was "Love Me Tender."

A few years ago I had an opportunity to sing with an Elvis impersonator, so we really had fun. I guess he couldn't believe that I knew all of that music, but I do. I love it very much and I watched all of his movies, pretty much.

JE: Interesting that resentment. You saw Elvis take what you—

ED: Yes.

JE: ...believe was black music and this white boy became a major idol using your music.

ED: Yeah, and it was in slightly different styling. He kind of took some of the edge off where it was acceptable, you know, more acceptable in a community. But even so he had a hard time 'cause parents really didn't want their daughters falling all over the place for Elvis either. But he did take the cultural music and make it palatable for other cultures.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And you cannot deny the fact that he was an absolute marvelous performer.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And from all I can understand, he had an excellent heart for people. He gave so much back to the community there in Memphis. So really can't hold anything but admiration for him as a performer.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). So you graduated in 1960?

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And he's on the scene by that time.

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative), he's on the scene.

JE: I'm going to jump ahead to '64 when—

ED: Good.

JE: ...the Beatles, was the Beatles of any interest to you?

ED: Yeah. Not especially except as an adult I realize that they had a great gift and ability. But yes, I didn't fall all over the place.

JE: Right. It wouldn't have been your style of music, would it?

ED: Oh no, I have all styles. You know, [singing] "I go out walking, after midnight, out in the starlight, just hoping you and me, somewhere a-walking after midnight searching for me-e-e."

JE: Patsy Cline?

ED: Yeah. I was a country singer at Manassas High School.

JE: Oh really?

ED: Yes. The "Tennessee Waltz," I love that.

JE: Patty Page?

ED: Patty Page. There are many of them I love singing. Even now I will take a country song like Whitney Houston did. She took Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You," and made it into almost another song. It's marvelous songwriters, in country music. I love country music.

Chapter 07—8:50
Voice Training

John Erling: In 1960, you graduate?

Ernestine Dillard: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Then what happens to you?

ED: Well, that was kind of an interesting turnabout. When I graduated there were three hundred plus young people graduating that year, which is a remarkable number of young people graduating from high school. And we had one of the best-known schools for educating young people. I mean, thoroughly educating. And I was happy to say that of three hundred I was in the top twenty-five to graduate. And I was given an academic scholarship, don't remember the exact amount, and also two music scholarships.

But I was ignorant to the fact of how much that mattered for going to college. So I was focused on having *all* the money. It's kind of in my nature, you know, to have all the money that I needed to go to school. And my parents weren't able to do that.

So I don't know, I may have been mercenary, and I may have been just not sure what was going on, wanting to be away. You know, at that age you want to be away from your family controls and all of that, so I got married.

JE: At eighteen?

ED: Eighteen. A few weeks out of high school I got married. And my husband, he was five years older, he promised to send me to nursing school. That was my goal, I was going to nursing school. And I didn't want to do it in the circumstances that were in my home.

My stepfather, at that time, had been in the military so he had been sent to work at a place in Alabama, and I had to finish school staying with one of my aunts in order to graduate from Manassas. I didn't see any conclusion to that by going to Mobile and really getting what I wanted, which was a nursing degree.

So I think that's why I accepted this young man I had been dating for about a year and a half. He wanted to get married so I said, "Fine." So I got married. And we stayed married seven years.

He kept his word, he helped me to go because I wanted all the money again. So I worked for several months as a maid, a domestic housekeeper in keeping children. Paid the big sum of twenty dollars a week. We saved the money and I went to nursing school for the first time.

JE: And are you singing too along this time?

ED: Yes. I never stopped singing. I was singing with special groups in the community or singing at church always. I never dropped church, I always went there, and that's a whole new community almost because if you sing they will send you here or there or sing for this wedding or this funeral or whatever. So the music was always there.

There were a few competitions as a young person that I entered, just because I like competition, for one thing. And there was a radio station, WDIA, where B. B. King had his show. There were a group of young people called the Teen Towners, and you had to audition to sing with them.

I did not make the cut to sing with them, but I did win a prize and kind of became known around the radio station a little bit. So I did have exposure all these years that we've talked about. I had exposure with my music.

I was fortunate in high school, if we can go back for a minute. I had as my choral music instructor a lady named Bobbie Blakely Jones. She was from Mississippi, and the interesting thing is that she was contemporary and friends, good friends with Leontyne Price, the great opera singer. They both had come from the same town and the same school and they went to college together. But she chose to teach, and Leontyne, of course, chose to perform. Over the years she even accompanied her many times in her solo concerts.

JE: Hmm.

ED: So that's who I had as an instructor. When people ask me, "Have you been trained?" and I said, "Yes," because she was a hard taskmaster, but she did it in love.

JE: You were about how old then? When you were—

ED: When I was with her?

JE: Right.

ED: I think ninth grade through twelfth grade.

JE: Wow.

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative). So I had her for four years. And even after, I was home Memphis singing with the Memphis Symphony and she came out and her little gift was always a brand new penny. She would give you a brand new penny if you were one of her students. She came to this concert with the symphony and she brought me my penny. She was so proud.

I had been away a long time and I came back. And when I came back, my debut at home was with the Memphis Symphony. So she was very critical, maybe critique is a better word, 'cause she wasn't negative in that sense. She'd say, "Didn't you miss your cue?"

I was singing, [singing] "Mama may have, Papa may have, God bless the child who's got his own," and there was a whole interval there when I should have come in and I didn't. The conductor had lost his score and he was supposed to cue me on when to come in but he had left his score in the Green Room.

So she said, "Didn't you miss your cue?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am, I did."

She said, "Well, no one knows it but you and me," she said, "but you did the right thing, you kept singing."

I said, "Yes ma'am."

It was wonderful to have her. I think I was blessed to have her all those years.

JE: Well, it gave you a tremendous foundation for the rest of your life, probably.

ED: Absolutely, absolutely.

Also doing my nursing at Memphis State University, is where it was, it's now Memphis University, I was in the music department. I needed some extra easy credits because nursing is not easy. So I took music. In the process I got to do *Porgy and Bess*, a professional version of *Porgy and Bess*, with the Memphis Opera Theater. I got the role of Serena and that started me getting serious about having good coaches.

Ella Gerba was the director, she was from New York. She said she didn't know whether she wanted me to take that role because I had not had any real music training, so to speak. And she was afraid I might lose my voice over the weeks that we had to do this production.

I promised her that if she would give me the role I would take some voice lessons. So I got a voice teacher for about six weeks. And I got one of the best, Jean Paul List was considered one of the best. She was a graduate of Julliard.

I also had worked with Leontyne.

JE: Interesting. You had to work out your vocal chords like an athlete needed to work out muscles as well.

ED: Yeah.

JE: And to make your voice strong enough to carry that part, that's what she was concerned about.

ED: That's what, yeah.

JE: Right.

ED: That's what she was concerned about, that I would lose my voice midway.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: That the presentations, it has this wonderful aria in there and it has to be done with clarity, so she was afraid that I might not be able to pull it off.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And I did.

JE: Great victory.

ED: Great victory. So that was the music going along with the nursing and the other things in my life. There's this personal life that's going on all the time as well.

JE: But it's interesting you obviously were noted by those who were teachers. They gravitated to you because we see some talent here and we want to help this talent—

ED: Yes.

JE: ...develop.

ED: Yes.

JE: And so you had that going for you.

ED: Yes. And voice coaches are notorious for that. If they see that you're making some technical mistakes and you have all this gift, they will do what they can to preserve it.

There was a guy in New York; he worked here in Tulsa with Simon Estes. He was his personal vocal coach, and he said the same thing.

There was a lady that worked with me at TU, and her husband, they wanted to teach me German because I needed to know how to do German. And so, Jen, at Oral Roberts University, you know, they find that there's something going wrong there and they would just take me in and correct it. I had to pay them, of course, but these were renowned vocal coaches, you know—

JE: That had to feel really good and grateful that they would do that.

ED: That they would do that.

JE: Reach out to you because you may not have gone to them but they reached out to you.

ED: They reached out to me. Mr. Ellis is in New York, or was in New York. His lessons were quite expensive, but interestingly enough, I had won a contest in Savannah, Georgia, early on in the full-time career and I had the money to go to New York and work with him for a while. His last statement he asked me once, "Who taught you?"

My classic response was, "God taught me." And so many times he put people in my path to help, but he did most of it.

Mr. Ellis has this whisper of a voice. He said, "Well, God did a good job."

So I said, "Yeah, God did a good job." I thanked him. He had spent a week with me, every day, and told me that I was doing well.

Chapter 08—8:10
Marriage Breakup

John Erling: You were married for seven years. Did you have children in that seven-year period?
Ernestine Dillard: Yeah, we had three children. And, uh, he chose someone else.
JE: Your husband?
ED: Yeah.
JE: Chose someone else?
ED: Yeah.
JE: So he left you for another woman?
ED: Yeah he did.
JE: Is that what you're saying?
ED: Yes exactly.
JE: And are you in school at that point or out of—
ED: No I was out of school working.
JE: So you were fine, you working.
ED: Um-hmm (affirmative), I was out working.
JE: So tell us about the drama of that and how you were left alone then with three children.
ED: Um-hmm (affirmative). I don't know what motivates me, I wish I knew me better. But he was gone for about a week and I was pregnant with our last child. I noticed that he was not there, but I had heard rumors that he was seeing someone else. He was kind of like my father, he was a womanizer, you know.

But on the other hand, I have to say that he was good. He worked, he took care of as much as he could take care of in the family, as far as taking care of the children and all that. But, nonetheless, he found that he had more fun with this other woman.

As I said, I'd go to church and he didn't. I sing Christian music and he really wanted me to sing in clubs. So this lady was just more fun. He could party and dance and have fun with her and he went off to Chicago with her.

JE: How did you handle all that?
ED: Well, I called and used information and found her number in Chicago. And I called and he picked up the phone, and I said, "Oh I just wanted you to know that I know that I you're there and we're done." And I just continued to work and take care of the children.

Um, I had my baby, at the time one of my sisters had been in an accident and my father wanted me to help take care of her because I was a nurse. So she came to the house and she was there to help lift some of the load of responsibility of watching the children and all that while I worked.

So I worked evenings and nights so that the children would always have my presence while they were there until they were all in school.

JE: But the feeling of rejection and all had to be tough?

ED: No. That's what I don't understand about me.

JE: Oh.

ED: When I'm done with something I'm done with it. We have no animosity. I still pray for him. We see each other and I try to get the children to include them in their life for their sakes.

I remarried and I did have one more child. I was married to him for nine years. It seems to me I must have a thing for picking guys who love women, or maybe they all love women.

JE: Your second husband—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...married for nine years?

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you had one child by him?

ED: One child.

JE: What did he do for a living?

ED: He was just an ordinary worker. He worked for a Jewish company that sold unusual shoes and he worked for them for years. He was also a great choral director. He worked a lot in church. He was twenty-two years my senior and I thought, "Okay, maybe this will be the knight in shining armor, who knows?"

JE: Was he a father figure to you?

ED: Probably. I don't know, most likely.

JE: Was it good for a while?

ED: It was good.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: All the years. I don't understand, I guess I must have picked it up from my mother, but there was never any animosity as long as they did what they were supposed to do. I don't have any negative feelings toward them and I see the good points they had. And as a child who has really grown up to understand spiritual things and be more mature I think there are a lot of things I could have done. But I'm just a person, "This is what I think you should do...these are my steps. You have to do this, this, and this, and then you will be who I think you should be. And if you're not who I think you should be then bye-bye." So I was quick to do that.

As a mature person, I understand that's not wise. Which is why my present husband and I have been together thirty-six years.

JE: Great. So how old were you when you married this man who was twenty-two years older than you?

ED: Twenty-seven, twenty-eight.

JE: So he's forty-seven then?

ED: Yeah he was in his forties.

JE: Did family members say, "Why are you marrying somebody this old?" Did people caution you on this? "You're doing something—"

ED: My mom did, my mom did quickly. And then she said, "Well, this is your life, but he's old enough to be your father."

I said, "Yeah, but he's nice." He was quite handsome and debonair and, uh—

JE: And he was musical.

ED: Musical, yes.

JE: So you did share a common—

ED: Yes. He helped me a great deal as far as church and other churches and that kind of thing, as far as that type of music was concerned. He was quite helpful. We even founded a community choir together. And that choir produced a lot of very strong leaders. We started with young people, produced a lot of strong leaders, some of them state representatives and pastors and that kind of thing. Because it was really a very good community choir.

But I think I gave up on our life together.

JE: Did he run off with someone too?

ED: Nope. He did have somebody but—

JE: That wasn't what brought—

ED: That wasn't—I found out about that later.

JE: Okay.

ED: It was just me. I—I—

JE: You decided?

ED: I decided.

JE: You told him?

ED: Yeah, "We're done."

JE: Hmm.

ED: And, you know, in the dynamics of a family there are things that go on. He's a wonderful father, I have to say that always, that he was a wonderful father. And he had, other than our son, five children.

JE: So you became mother to five children?

ED: Well, most of them were almost as old as I was, except the final two.

JE: How was that working for everybody?

ED: I don't know, it worked fine for me, I loved them.

JE: Yeah.

ED: I loved them. There were three left at home, and one daughter who also became a nurse.

She went to nursing school after we met. We never really had any friction. They were very respectful and now very loving.

A little sidebar, interesting thing is, his oldest son graduated from high school at Manassas the year before I did.

JE: Oh really?

ED: You know?

JE: So, uh—

ED: And he was also a graduate of Manassas. He was one of the earlier graduates. That was in his favor to begin with.

JE: So when you were all together at Christmas and so forth—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: It was almost like brothers, sisters.

ED: We had a wonderful relationship, but they always respected me as his wife. And the younger children and his youngest son, with his wife that was deceased, his wife was deceased. There's a wonderful story about that before we were married. I never knew her, I never saw her, but I did see her in a dream before I married him, and that was always powerful in my life, that I saw her. What she spoke to me was, "Take good care of the children and my husband is John Ray."

JE: How about that?

ED: Yes.

JE: That was amazing.

ED: Yeah. And so I was, I was a little scared to do it. I said, "I'm being watched."

JE: You're right.

ED: That wasn't a bad relationship. If I was going to psychoanalyze myself, I did give myself a good talking to about it. But he is deceased.

JE: So you brought the marriage to an end. Are we into the '60s?

ED: It had to be '76, because my husband, Loomis Dillard, Reverend Loomis Dillard, he and I got married in 1978.

JE: When you were divorced from your second husband—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...you moved where?

ED: I moved to Indiana. I left him and moved to Indiana.

JE: And did you have children at home yet then?

ED: Yes, uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: That you took with you?

ED: Yes. I took four children with me.

JE: So there you are alone again—

ED: Well, yeah.

JE: ...with some children.

ED: Yeah.

JE: And then you moved to Indiana?

ED: Yes, and we were doing fine. I bought a home and moved to Indiana, that's where the children and I were living.

JE: Why did you move to Indiana?

ED: I think I'm just an adventuresome person. I didn't really have a reason except I liked—I had been there to visit and sing. I sang for churches there and I liked the atmosphere so I decided I would just sell everything and buy a home there. And that's what I did. It got me out of Memphis, for one thing, and it's like putting my past behind and just starting fresh, basically, is what it was.

Chapter 09—7:35
King's Assassination

John Erling: Would you categorize yourself as an optimistic person?

Ernestine Dillard: Absolutely.

JE: And these experiences obviously did not drag you down or put you in bouts of depression or those kinds of things?

ED: No.

JE: Which could have happened to some people.

ED: Yeah that's right. I am very optimistic and I always have hope. There is something better.

While we're talking about hope and being optimistic, I will say that I worked for St. Joseph's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, before moving. I was working the next floor up the night they shot Martin and brought him into the hospital emergency room. And I have to share that.

JE: Martin Luther King was killed—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...April 4, 1968.

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative). I wanted to share this because it was a very traumatic time and it was a life-changing time for me. Not so much for, as with some people, because the Civil Rights leader, a great one, Nobel Prize winner, all of that, but because I saw the face of hate. And I can express it now. I'm sure at twenty- whatever I was, I couldn't really express it. I was just feeling it. I was crying like everyone else.

And there was a doctor there that I respected the highest, he was one of the greatest surgeons. His patients always did well, and he had no respect to race or color when he was taking care of patients because he expected us as nurses to do the best no matter who it was. He would take us to task. He'd had a bad heart problem and he had to ride on one of those little scooters in the hospital—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: ...to see his patients. But I still had great respect for him. And that night when Martin King was in the emergency room the doctor was on the second floor standing by the window. He looked out the window and I would think, in my ideas of things, that he would have gone down to share his gift, you know, to see if maybe as a surgeon he could do something to help save this life.

What he did instead though, he said, "Well," and I quote, "they have made a blankety-blank martyr of him. I suppose they are happy now." And he just sat down and started doing his charts.

Not the death so much, but that thing brought me to tears because I'm thinking, "This man has given his life to saving life and wanting to do good with people. And now he lets hate show its face like this." And I thought about that and I'm going, "I can't believe this."

So I started crying and I left the floor. And I don't remember when I went back. I don't know if I went back that night, I can't remember. That's how traumatic. It really hurt me. But I made up my mind after that that in all the things that happened, the violence and all of that that went on that night, my then husband had been thrown down on the streets. He was coming to pick me up, I think. And put down as if he was a criminal, before he could even come for me that particular night.

But I made up mind that I had that much Christianity that hate would not rule my life. And I knew then what it will do to your life. So I made a point from that day forward to walk in love. It's been a journey, all these years, to walk in love. Being on this side of racism it's like a child being born into a household where he or she is not loved. Rejection comes, you know.

And I started to learn about that process in my studies and everything. I started to learn, What is it like to be ten children in the family and you're the black sheep, and nobody loves you and you're rejected? That's what happens to a whole community of people where a whole community where we're rejected. Whoever comes into the family is fairly well accepted and helped, but this particular one is always rejected. What are the feelings that come up?

When you think about it, all the feelings that you would see in a child, how he or she would act out if they were rejected by a family, that's what you see in the black community. And the only way we can overcome that is to learn how to love like Jesus loved.

And I tell people all the time, I say, "Remember who picked up Jesus' cross to help him." So we need to learn to forgive, no matter where. I don't care if you ask me to forgive you or not I'm going to forgive you because it's for my best interest. I'm that selfish.

So I just wanted to share that particular part of my story. And then we go on to Indiana.

JE: So you were in, what was the name of the hospital?

ED: St. Joseph's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.

JE: Where they brought Martin Luther King?

ED: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives). That was the closest hospital other than the county hospital.

JE: So everybody, there must have been a lot of talk and everybody's talking about this and you heard about it and he's coming to our hospital? Or he's in our hospital?

ED: Oh no, he was down there and, you know, it wasn't that big a hospital. If you're on the second floor where we were, Medical Surgical Unit is just above the emergency room there. As a matter of fact, many times I had been called to work in the emergency room when they were short of help.

JE: So you could have been in there when he came in?

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative). But I knew he was down there and the doctor knew he was down there. And the nurses on the floor. I had some very sympathetic coworkers.

There was an older lady who was the charge person for our whole unit. She was a marvelous woman. Mrs. Perry was her name. A wonderful nurse. She had more knowledge in her head than many of us who had just graduated. We respected her to the highest.

So they were very sympathetic and caring. There was only one other nurse of color working there at that time. She was not on duty that night.

JE: So you were the only—

ED: Only one. There were two in the whole hospital. I don't think we even had any nursing assistants that were of color. We may have had one but I don't think so.

JE: Well, the rest of the nurses, they too were in shock or felt the pain of it all?

ED: Yeah, most of us were feeling the pain, you know?

JE: Yeah.

ED: This is a human being and I may not agree with his politics or what he's doing, but he is well-known. And he's killed in our city trying to help some men who are treated less than first class citizens. Much worse.

JE: I'm coming back to the doctor. He would often find himself in that room. He'd go down and perform surgery himself?

ED: Oh yeah.

JE: So that was his bailiwick in the hospital, and the fact that he didn't even make a move—

ED: Yeah.

JE: ...to go down there—

ED: Being a doctor he should have been there, at least to see.

JE: Right. "I got to run down and see what's going on."

ED: Have to see.

JE: And he just sat there.

ED: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: So all of that just stunned you?

ED: Yeah it did. I'd run into children yelling dirty names or people saying things every once in a while or mispronouncing the word Negro and stuff like that. But to me, nursing medicine was a sacred thing. Remember, I had wanted to be in medicine since I was a child, so to me, I thought high ideals when it comes to people in medicine. You have to overcome your personal feelings in order to help people.

Chapter 10—5:30
Married Again

John Erling: Were you specializing in a certain kind of nursing at that time?

Ernestine Dillard: At that time I wasn't, I was doing medical surgical nursing. I worked on a medical surgical floor. That was my second position. I had worked as a chest disease specialist for several years before I actually got my REN, so that was my first time to work in there.

And I did specialize later, at that same hospital, actually I became an IV therapist then. I thought I was the best one out.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: If I couldn't find you a vein and give you some fluids, you didn't have any. But yeah, that was my specialty at that time.

JE: So then you did go to Indiana?

ED: I went to Indiana. I was doing nursing again. I was over a facility for geriatrics. I worked part-time hours, probably about three days a week. And I did music the rest of the time.

JE: Were you making money in singing?

ED: Oh, a little bit. It was never my goal to make a lot of money, it was just my goal to sing, and to sing in as many places as I could. I would make a little bit, it was enough to supplement. And nursing then, I was making a bit more money than I had been making prior years, so it was adequate, the days that I was working was adequate to take care of our needs.

JE: Somewhere along here a gentleman comes into your life and he says, "I want you to be my wife."

ED: Yes, this gentleman, Reverend Loomis Dillard. I had gone to Birmingham, Alabama, to a convention. They had invited me to come and be there at the convention so it was in this particular denomination. I spent about three days there singing for them and they did pay me for that.

I met him there and he walked up and said hi. And then later, he called me and told me that I had agreed to go on a lunch date with him.

And I told him, you know, "That was your first mistake. I don't think I ever agreed to do that." But I went anyway with him and his brother-in-law, his sister's husband, to lunch. And I guess his sister's husband was a chaperone so that we didn't have an appearance of anything negative going on.

Then the next evening he took me to dinner. I tell everybody and I want the whole world to know that dinner was Arby's roast beef sandwiches. In recent years I've discovered that he's always frugal like that. But we did, and when he took me to my room he stopped at the door and he said, "You ever thought about being married to a minister?"

And I said, "No."

He said, "Well, God says you're my wife."

And I looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. Said goodnight and went in and called my best girl friend and told her, "This man's crazy." Decided that I don't even like him, etc., etc. "And he says God told him something but I want him to know and I will tell him that God talks to me just like he does to him. I haven't heard any such thing."

So that was his story for the next, I think, maybe, eight months. 'Cause he was living in Virginia, and I was living in Indiana. So we talked and communicated by phone. And he wrote. I didn't write and I didn't call, but he did it all. And now that I know him well, it was costing him a pretty penny to call long distance. You know, long distance was a toll charge at one time.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And writing, he absolutely hates to write, but he was writing me a letter every week. He was constantly saying the same thing. I think persistence pays off. Finally I decided to ask God for sure.

JE: And did you get the answer?

ED: Oh yeah, I got the answer. I did like Gideon, I said, "If he's going to be mine and you want me to be his he'll have to come here because I'm not going there. I'm not going to live in Virginia." And sure enough, the Bishop sent him to Indiana.

JE: Okay. And then he became a minister of a church there?

ED: Oh yes. He was a minister of a church in Evansville, Indiana.

JE: Is that where you were living?

ED: No, I was living in Indianapolis, which is only about an hour or two—

JE: Okay.

ED: ...from there. But he still came to Indiana, so I'm going, "Okay, on that little note I guess you've spoken." Obviously he did. We've been—

JE: Married now for—

ED: ...together now for thirty-six years.

JE: How old were you then when you got married?

ED: I was in my early thirties, I think.

JE: And how much older is he than you?

ED: He is ten years older than I am. I'm seventy-two, he's going to be eighty-three this month.

JE: All right.

ED: He'll have a birthday next week. It's funny because he wouldn't tell anyone for a long time how old he was. And finally I said, "You're just going to have to tell me the truth how old you really are." So—

JE: Oh, he wouldn't even tell you?

ED: Oh no. I had to find his discharge papers to find out how old he was.

JE: And ten years was not a big deal to you? After twenty-two.

ED: It's no big deal, I mean, please. And beside that he is quite a man. He is six-five and extremely black and solid. He's a disciplined man 'cause I guess part of the service, plus growing up as a farmer's son. He grew up in a little place called Cross Anchor, or Spartanburg, South Carolina. He has all those characteristics of a very strong, determined person. That's probably the person I needed because I'm a very strong, determined person myself.

Chapter 11—7:45
Pastor's Wife

John Erling: So you're living in Indiana. Let's get you to Tulsa, Oklahoma. How does that happen?

Ernestine Dillard: I married this Methodist minister, he pastored there in Evansville and did a lot of community work there, but he was transferred to Phoenix, Arizona, and it was kind of uneventful, just the life of a pastor and family. I must say that he took on the family and just became a good father, good father, and a good support.

We moved from Phoenix, Arizona, to Berkeley, California, where we continued the ministry. I continued the music and from Berkeley we went to Seattle. We did the same thing. I continued the nursing and I continued the music, and mostly just regular family life and living in general. And he got a word that he had to move to Oklahoma.

I dug in my feet. I said, "Where?" I could not believe that he was going to bring us to Oklahoma.

I had a prayer partner friend and she was saying, "We have to pray about this. God's going to fix this."

Well, God did, he sent him on over to Oklahoma. I did manage to go on a tour, one of the long tours that I took with a group called the African American Woman 1500 to Present. And it sort of details the lives and struggle of African American women. And I was the focal character as leading soloist for it. We went to West Point, we sent to Sarah Lawrence College, we went to colleges in military bases all over the country with that play. Which was a good thing, I thoroughly enjoyed that. But near the end of it was when we had to make our move to Oklahoma. And I had to go back to Seattle, pack, sell our home, and do all that stuff.

My husband came on over to Oklahoma, and I'm still complaining because I don't want to go. During that interval, my mother went home to be with the Lord and so did my father. And we adopted two children, my husband and I, from Washington state, special needs children.

JE: That's kind of like a ministry almost, special needs children.

ED: It is. Well, special needs in the sense that emotional needs, not physical needs. My husband and I thought we were real smart. We had raised all these children. He had four girls before we were married and we had all these children that we had raised so we were real good parents, you know. So why don't we help somebody out?

Anyway, that sounds like my thinking more than his, he just went along with it because he pretty much feels the same way. We didn't like the foster care system, so we decided, well, we won't deal with that. We wanted to help but we won't help that way. That's detrimental to the children. So we decided to adopt them.

We had a group of siblings, five of them, that we were first opting to take. Five small children. Were we out of our minds? I don't know.

JE: But you didn't take five?

ED: They wouldn't give us the five because the parents would not release them.

JE: But you would have?

ED: We were planning it. I was terribly disappointed because we couldn't get those children.

JE: But aren't you glad you didn't get all five?

ED: No.

JE: Oh really?

ED: I wish I could have gotten those too.

JE: Wow, but you had two?

ED: We had two, and they are wonderful adults now. They had some difficult times, but when you see some of the things—I have a love for children, and it's not a mushy kind of thing. I

want them to be disciplined and I want them to be kind and good characters, but I don't want to see them abused and dragged through all kinds of terrible situations. And he felt the same.

So we adopted these two. There were five of them, two had been lost to the street; the mom abused one until she died, she was fifteen months old. So we took the other two. They're fine young people now compared to what they had to go through. There's a growth that they still need, you know, they're still young people, but they're young adults and they have their own families now.

JE: Wow.

ED: And we're proud of them.

JE: How—

ED: We are proud of them.

JE: Yes indeed.

ED: I would do it again. But back to—

JE: The call to Oklahoma.

ED: ...Oklahoma.

JE: But where in Oklahoma?

ED: He went to Okmulgee. And I said, "Who ever heard of an Okmulgee?" So finally I did manage to get the house sold and all of that. He didn't have to come back until the very end to get all of us and our extra belongings and bring us over here.

But my girl friend, who was supposed to be praying that we didn't have to do it wrote me a letter and told me, "God said, 'Bloom where you're planted.' "

I said, "Thanks a lot!" But coming to Oklahoma is probably the best thing that God could have done for us.

JE: You were taking on a role when you married this minister—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...a pastor's wife.

ED: That's right.

JE: And that's a special position in the church.

ED: Yes.

JE: Did you find that easy to do?

ED: Yes. My answer to that sounds a little frivolous but it's not. To me, as I've grown spiritually, I think that if you really say you're walking like Christ then you shouldn't have any problem being a minister's wife. Because loving and forgiving goes for everybody. And being able to see another person's needs and help them, that's a wonderful responsibility. And it's the same with the children. So to me, whatever spirit that is that reaches out you can double whatever you need.

And yes, there are times when people do really strange things or say really strange things, but you look on the other side of that. You have to develop a love for souls. If you do that, that's the answer. And I'm thankful that he helped me to learn that before I became a minister's wife. I'm sure that's why he sent me a minister.

JE: The two of you were a team because here he is the preacher, and here he's got his wife who—

ED: Built in choir.

JE: ...is a singer. Were you a choir director, leader, in the churches? Or did you not do that?

ED: I was smart enough not to do that.

JE: Okay. But you did plenty of solo work in his church, right?

ED: Yes, that's what I did.

JE: That was perfect for the two of you then and you were a team, weren't you that way?

ED: Yes. And one thing you learn is not to allow yourself to usurp any of the authority of the pastor. And that's a little walk because people will always want you to tell the pastor this or tell the pastor that. And my thing is, "Oh no, I'm going to let you talk to him." Because it's a bad thing when a pastor thinks that his wife is overstepping her bounds. So I stay way under them. And I let him order me around at church.

JE: At church?

ED: At church.

JE: When it came home it was your church.

ED: Yes. When we're at home he says, "I still have to take the trash out when I'm at home."

JE: Right.

ED: But yeah, we work well together.

JE: All right.

ED: In that respect.

JE: But now I know you live in Bixby.

ED: I live in Bixby.

JE: So how did you get from Okmulgee to Bixby?

ED: They moved him to Coweta, and we lived in the parsonage in Coweta. Then he went on sabbatical so he could work on his PhD at Oral Roberts. And while he was on sabbatical we visited another friend's church during that time, and that was Mt. Zion.

JE: Mt. Zion?

ED: Baptist. Downtown Tulsa.

JE: Right.

ED: But when you're not working in the church, of course, you don't have any rights to be in the parsonage. So we got our own space. We bought a home in Bixby. We bought that home twenty years ago. And that's where we were. No matter where he had to go to pastor, because he had to go to Coffeeville to pastor—

JE: Okay.

ED: ...for several years. He had to go to McAlester to pastor several years. But we always commuted from where we are in Bixby.

JE: So you'd go with him?

ED: Oh yeah. If I was not out of town or whatever I would go with him wherever he was called to pastor, and do whatever support he needed me to do. If it was typing or whatever.

Chapter 12—9:15
Singing Competition

John Erling: So then our community became aware of Ernestine Dillard. There's this woman who's got a great voice and she knows how to sing "God Bless America."

Ernestine Dillard: Yeah, yeah, thank you very much.

JE: And so you became known to us?

ED: Yes.

JE: Because you lived here?

ED: Yes, absolutely. I think because I lived here I was just grafted into the entire Oklahoma community. Before we had the big catastrophe in Oklahoma City. Because I worked for the Tulsa City County Health Department as a nurse-clinician that I went to work as a nurse. I also went to work for Brookhaven, which is a mental health facility, a Christian mental health facility. I worked for them first.

All this time I was supported by wonderful people that I worked with. I just can't imagine how kind they've been.

I had a friend at this Baptist church where we were going, who came to me, a young friend, actually, she was young enough to be my daughter. She said, "My sister told me to give you this application and said to tell you that God wanted you to have it."

And, you know, I'm very skeptical when people say God said something. I'm married to a man because God said it. But anyway, I said, "Well, why doesn't she use it? She sings. Why don't you use it? You sing."

She said, "No, she says it for you."

So I took the application. It was an application to Savannah on Stage, American Traditions Competition. I filled out the application and I needed to send in a cassette. For anyone who doesn't know what a cassette is that's the thing before the iPod. So I had to send in a competition cassette.

And I went to this guy, his name was Lonnie Liggitt. He had Greenwood Studios. The reason I went to him was because one day at work I opened the Yellow Pages and I said, "Well, God, show me where I'm going to make this recording." And that's what came up, Greenwood Studios.

So I went down to Greenwood. He has this long dissertation about how it was pouring down, rainy, and this nurse came in and he didn't think she could sing. And she was going to make this competition tape. And it's partly true, you know, he probably didn't have much hope for me making this tape. But we made it. And I started to sing, and sure enough, he did change the microphones. He changed the microphones because the one he had in there just sort of psst. I think I hit some notes or something and so it was—

JE: You blew the microphone up?

ED: Yes. He told me to get right in it.

JE: So he got another microphone?

ED: Yeah, he did. We got the tape done. We sent it off. From that time on we became friends, good friends. He tried to help as much as he could.

JE: So was this the American Traditions Competition?

ED: American Traditions Competition. I was probably the oldest person in that competition. Most of them were young ladies from Broadway and Julliard and other colleges and stuff like that. I was petrified.

JE: You had like 145 entrants?

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative). They only brought thirty-five or forty-five, I can't remember the number, that they brought over to Savannah to actually compete in person. That was long before *American Idol*.

JE: But this was *American Idol*.

ED: Yeah.

JE: Savannah on Stage, American Traditions.

ED: Savannah on Stage, yes.

JE: So then did they play your presentation or did you sing it? How did that work?

ED: They had a selection committee before we arrived. They played our cassette and I heard someone say that they would take my competition and just play it all through the office everywhere and they were saying that they were crying with the tape. That's what they said, and so I came over along with the other thirty-five or forty-five people that were chosen from the tape selection.

They put us up in homes, you know, a lot of the old colonial homes that have been redone, and they assigned us each to a family. They just took care of us for a week and a half or more of competition. We went out every other day, depending on when our day

was to sing. We went through the quarterfinal rounds, then the semifinal rounds, and then, of course, the final round. There were six of us left out of that.

I was amazed every time they called my name. The interesting thing was they had Della Reese and Nettie Kasi and George Shirley and tremendous judges.

JE: Were they there on site?

ED: Yes.

JE: In your musical presentation, which included "God Bless America—"

ED: It was the last one.

JE: ...you had how many other songs?

ED: Oh, the first competition I think we had ten minutes or twelve minutes. Then the next time we had to do a fifteen-minute presentation. And the finals we had to do a thirty-minute presentation so we had whatever number of songs that you could get in at that amount of time.

The music had to represent what they call "American music," whether it was Broadway, some of the currents, or some of the people from Broadway of yesteryear. And it had to be jazz or gospel or blues. They had specific composers or singers that we had to get our music from. So they had a prearranged list of songs we had to learn.

JE: So now you're performing live to them?

ED: Yes.

JE: How old are you when you're doing this?

ED: Fifty-two.

JE: And you said you were probably the oldest.

ED: I was probably, if I wasn't the oldest, I was next to it.

JE: You could be a mother—

ED: I think I was the oldest one.

JE: Might have could have been Mother to some of them, is that true?

ED: Absolutely.

JE: Right.

ED: Most of them, yes.

JE: When you finished your presentation—

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative), the last one?

JE: The last one.

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How did they react?

ED: The people in the audience just stood and clapped and yelled. It was like someone running across the goalpost with the football or something. It was just amazing. Then some of the singers started singing, the ones who didn't win, they started singing "Praise God from Whom All Blessing Flow."

Della Reese came up and she said, "Didn't God tell you that he would never leave you nor forsake you?"

And I had been petrified the whole time, so I was running home to my home where I was staying every day after our competition. I would be praying and crying and asking God, "Why did you bring me here to this? All these wonderful people."

And then they would call me, "They need you here at the theater because your name has been called for the next round."

And I'm going, "Oh my God."

JE: Because you heard voices that you thought were better than you, probably?

ED: Oh yeah.

JE: Okay.

ED: And they were young. I thought they were fantastic and all their credentials, they graduated from this place and they had studied with this one. Once I was standing by the stage and I was crying.

One of the ladies there came up and she said, "God has brought you here for a time. You just stand up and just do your best." She was just there staying around to help out.

JE: Who won that competition?

ED: I did. I won ten thousand dollars and a gold medal.

JE: What a thrill it had to be for you.

ED: It was, I still get excited when I think about that. It's amazing, fifty-two. So unless you know that years don't mean a thing and here I am, I'm seventy-two and I just came back from singing three days at the Trumpet Awards in Atlanta. Amazing.

JE: Those Trumpet Awards, what is that?

ED: It's for community service for people who no matter what level they are as far as their exposure to the world, whatever, whether they're famous surgeons or whether they're famous dishwashers or whatever it is, they're giving back to the community.

The late James Avery, we know him from *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, he was a frequent person there. Because at one time they gave him an award. It's amazing how so many people, you know them in one arena, they're doing this because they're acting or they're dancing. But then when you see them at home in their community they're giving back so very much. It's just always amazing.

But she gives these awards as an extension of the work that Martin Luther King did. And it's really named for him. There's a thing called Walk of Fame. The people on the Walk of Fame are people who are giving back.

Desmond Tutu at one time, his boots and things are on the Walk of Fame in Atlanta. This is a wonderful place to get a lot of history.

There are many people at this Trumpet Award, they're just coming to attend and you know that they're giving back so much to the community.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). As a result of winning the American Traditions Competition, then did you actually go on tour with Della Reese?

ED: She offered but she called and something happened with her people, you know, that did the planning of the tour. She said she had no control. She sent me flowers and promised to have me come to her church and all that. But none of that really worked out. And that's okay.

JE: But you did go on to perform at the Kennedy Center?

ED: Yes.

JE: Tell us a little bit about that.

ED: At first they had a blackout with that.

JE: They had a blackout?

ED: A blackout. Well, the workers went on strike about that time and they curtailed what they called the pro bono performances that they had given out. So it was a while before they got all that squared away. It just took labor relations having—

JE: Hmm.

ED: ...to work out things with the stagehands so that they could come back and offer to that, to reinstate that prize.

Chapter 13—2:30
Singing Invitations

John Erling: You performed in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC.

Ernestine Dillard: Yes.

JE: I mean, you're flying high now, aren't you? But by now you won that competition, the confidence you must have. You won that, yes, you're walking into centers that you perhaps had never even been in, and the National Cathedral. Did you walk into those things with confidence? Or was there an intimidation factor? Tell us how you felt about that.

ED: I'm very nervous about performances when I'm not sure of the music or some aspect of what I'm doing. Otherwise, I do have confidence that I can do it—as long as I know my music and my literature and all that. If there is something slightly amiss about anything, if I'm having trouble with the orchestra or I'm not coming in quite right, it bothers me a lot.

JE: In 2012, you sang for the 125th anniversary for the Statue of Liberty. What an honor to be asked for that.

ED: I have this great love of our country. I mean, I'm a patriot from way back. I have a great love for veterans. I guess I watched too many war movies or something, but I do have a

great love for veterans. And seniors. Because to me they're like a different group of the strong foundation with seniors. And so we do that.

And I sing a lot for the VFW, National Veterans of Foreign Wars. The Ladies Auxiliary of the VFW were having a national convention in Washington, DC, and the president was a good acquaintance of mine. She'd invited me to come and do the music for them.

When I went there and did the music there were three ladies who were in charge of doing the celebration for the 125th year of the Statue of Liberty. They asked me if I would come and sing for them.

And I went, "Oh my God, I am so honored." I was like speechless. Would I come? Are you kidding me? Yes.

And Bob Archer, who is over the Tulsa Praise Orchestra, was there with me doing sound for me, and he says, "Can she bring her band?"

And I looked at him, I said, "My band?"

He said, "Yes your band."

She said, "Well, yes, if she has a band she can bring her band."

So he proceeded to get the band to go. So I went with a group of musicians that I love working with. And so the entire band and the Celebration Choir went with me. We enjoyed that tremendously. Did some concerts in churches and things while we were there as well.

Chapter 14—2:40
Oklahoma City Memorial Service

John Erling: Then you sang in Oklahoma City for the service of the Oklahoma City bombing—
Ernestine Dillard: Yeah.
JE: ...and the victims and their families. President Clinton was there.
ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).
JE: And Billy Graham was there.
ED: Um-hmm (affirmative).
JE: Talk to us about that day and your feelings.
ED: If I could just go a little bit before that, I wanted to tie that in with the Savannah thing. Because when we came back from Savannah and all this stuff that went with that news-wise they were saying, "Well, that's old news. We're not really interested in that since it happened some time ago, you know."

So Lonnie just started getting people aware, making them aware of what had happened in Savannah, that I had won this thing. And we got invited to the Governor's Inaugural here and I sang for the Inaugural, "God Bless America."

JE: Governor Keating?

ED: Um-hmm (affirmative). I sang for his inaugural and went on after that and we tried to get as much publicity as we possibly could. And I think part of that, not until after the bombing, I don't think, were you playing "God Bless America." But you were playing "God Bless America" a lot.

JE: I did.

ED: Yes.

JE: Right.

ED: After the bombing, I had another friend that was supporting. He's well-known internationally as a designer. His name was Charles Faudree. He was doing the Governor's Mansion as an interior design specialist. He called and asked me had anyone called me to sing for the memorial service that they were planning for the victims and the survivors of the bombing.

I said, "No, I was going up as a nurse but they told me they had all the nurses they needed because they were not getting many people rescued. So I don't know what I'm going to do now."

He said, "Well, just hang up the phone." He called her Kathy, "Kathy's going to call you." He's a big jokester.

And I said, "Sure, right, you're talking about the governor's wife is going to call me."

And he said, "Yes, I'm serious now. She's going to call you."

I said, "Okay."

So as soon as he hung up she called and asked would I mind being on the program for the memorial service if my name was not on there.

I said, "No."

She said, "We finished the program already but I had forgotten that you sang for the Inaugural." She said, "We must have you." She said, "And I'll get someone and they'll make it happen."

So I prepared myself and we all got up and went to Oklahoma City. And they didn't know where to put me. They just knew that the governor's wife said make it happen. So they asked me, "Where do you want to be?"

I said, "I don't really know, I don't care."

So finally, the person in charge said, "Well, we'll just put you on the end then."

I said, "Okay, that's fine."

JE: So you sang the last song?

ED: I sang the last song.

JE: "God Bless America."

ED: "God Bless America Medley."

JE: It was appropriate to be there too, wasn't it? At that point.

ED: Yes it was.

Chapter 15—2:56
Charles Faudree

John Erling: I should mention then Charles Faudree, who I've interviewed, can be heard elsewhere on this website.

Ernestine Dillard: Oh wonderful.

JE: And then he is dead now.

ED: Yeah.

JE: We're in January here—

ED: Yeah.

JE: ...and he died in December of 2013. A great loss to our community.

ED: Yes.

JE: How did you two become friends?

ED: I was singing for a fundraiser that Charles was a part of. He came up and asked me, "Where are you going to be singing?" in that beautiful Oklahoma accent of his. "Where are you going to be singing? I need to hear you again."

So I told him I was doing a concert that Sunday at one of the churches in Broken Arrow, so he and a group of friends showed up and they covered the front row. This is what he did, always, he covered the front row.

He's been a great supporter all these years. He started to follow me wherever I was going to be, he would be there. He even came to Paris, when I did my concert over there with a group of friends. So you know Charles, you know that's the way he is.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: He asked me, I guess maybe a year, a few months after that he'd been having some health problems, so he asked me would I sing for his funeral. We were not close friends at that time.

And I said, "Oh sure, yes, I'd love to."

So he paid me almost twenty years ago.

JE: Is that right?

ED: To sing for his funeral. Yes he did. And so, while he was very ill I talked to him two days before he passed. I called to see how he was doing and he was telling me he was doing

fine 'cause the medicine was making him feel better. So he said, "Well, you remember you promised to sing for my funeral?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, we got a contract and I already paid you."

I said, and I said, "Okay, friend, yes, yes, yes, okay, I will do that." I said, "But just leave me alone right now." Because I knew he was very ill and I just didn't really want to talk about it.

I told someone, and I don't mean this callously, if this had happened maybe twenty years ago it would have been a lot easier. But that was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do. It was almost as difficult as singing for my mother's funeral.

JE: Because you had become that fond of him?

ED: We've been such friends. And he'd call you early in the morning and periodically we'd make a date to have lunch so we could just catch up and see what's going on. And I'd drop by his shop. We were just good friends, very good friends.

JE: What song did you sing at his funeral?

ED: It was one of his favorites, it's "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The people in charge at the church suggested that I do a hymn.

JE: So you sang two songs?

ED: Yes. And the second one was most difficult.

JE: That was tough.

ED: Yeah. Lonnie came along to play. Lonnie Liggitt is a music person in the community, he has been for many years. He had the Greenwood Studios, he worked a lot with the symphony. He still does work a lot with symphonies. He's classically trained but I told him I corrupted him because he plays gospel really well now.

Chapter 16—1:45
Advice to Students

John Erling: What sort of advice do you give the young students? You're talking to high school students or college—

Ernestine Dillard: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And they're coming out into the world. Either those who are interested in music or those who are just interested in life. What do you say to them?

ED: If they're interested in music I just can't say anything better than, "Study. The Bible says study to show yourself approved. Study what you want to do and be sure this is what you

want. It's not the easiest profession to get into, but if you study your gift will make room for you.

"And I think you have to learn how to take care of your body. I think the blessing of doing that is the fact that when you are seventy-two and eighty-two your voice is still there serving you. You have to take care of the body in order for the voice to work.

"And by all means, don't go into it thinking that it's fame and fortune because all of that is fleeting. And the gift should be there to serve you and your community or your family or whoever. Your gift should be there to serve when all the fame and fortune, it may not be there. You can't do it for money. You have to have some inner force to have you motivated because there are a lot of beautiful voices, and a lot of beautiful gifts of all kinds. You have to have something special."

I got that from Della Reese. She said, "If you're singing or doing anything, if it doesn't touch someone else's heart then it's of no value."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And that much I remember.

JE: You've recorded a number of CDs, have you not?

ED: I've recorded five CDs.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

ED: And there is a website with my name on it, Ernestine Dillard. My daughter asked me to write it down because it's very long, but if you do Ernestine Dillard you should be able to get information and be able to get those CDs.

Chapter 17—2:30
Nobody Knows

John Erling: What song comes to mind as we conclude our interview? If I just had you sing a little phrase or two from it, what pops into your head that you would like to sing as a closing?

Ernestine Dillard: Um, I love spirituals, I think, most of all, but my biggest song would be "God Bless America." And I wish there was some way you could play that. But I love spirituals and one of my favorites is, "Nobody Knows." [singing] Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, glory, hallelujah. Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, oh yes, Lord. Sometimes I'm almost too gone, oh yes, my Lord. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, glory, glory, hallelujah.

JE: And the church said? Amen.

ED: Amen.

JE: Wow, you have tears, I have tears. And that was beautiful.

ED: Thank you.

JE: Thank you so much.

ED: Thank you.

JE: I've enjoyed this journey.

ED: Thank you, I have too.

JE: Right.

ED: Thank you.

Chapter 18—0:33
Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.