

Child of sharecropper and housecleaner in segregated Alabama felt destined for a better future

Description

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Mary Crenshaw came of age in segregated southern Alabama in the â??50s, just prior to the turbulent Civil Rights Era. Her father was a sharecropper on a white personâ??s farm and her mother did day work for white people. But Crenshaw saw different a life for herself.

â??Iâ??m a believer in that some things you are just destined for. I wanted better,â?• she said. â??I am the fourth of seven children. The others felt the struggle for a four-year higher education was too much.â?•

She also had a friend whose parents made sure all their kids went to vocational school or college. She realized that she could go to college, too.


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Mary Crenshaw

She set her sights on a career teaching physical education or math, eventually becoming a physical education teacher in the San Francisco Unified School District. Unmarried, she focused solely on work, home and church during her working years. â??I didnâ??t even have time to get to know my neighbors.â?•

That all changed when she retired in 2004. â??Thatâ??s when I got involved in my community.â?•

After retirement, working for her community

She devoted herself to giving back to her Bayview Hunters Point community. â??I wanted to help others in every way I can, as I was helped.â?• Crenshaw is now so busy she schedules doctorâ??s appointments around her community activities. â??I admit Iâ??m too busy some days, but I enjoy it.â?•

Crenshaw helped her church, the Baptist Church Without Walls, become part of The San Francisco African American Faith Based Coalition, an organization of 20 churches, mainly from the Bayview, whose mission is to strengthen the health, well-being and resilience of community members. â??We do such things as teaching nutrition, providing hot meals through our churches and establishing food pantries.â?•

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The Coalition makes sure no sugary drinks â?? a favorite beverage in the community â?? are served at church gatherings. They would like to obtain money from San Franciscoâ??s 2016 Sugary Drink Tax to do more education about the dangers of consuming too much sugar.

Another large part of Crenshawâ??s time is spent at the Bayview YMCA. From 2013 to 2016, she helped the athletic director coach girlsâ?? volleyball and conducts fundraisers to support the athletic program. â??We did bingo, but it doesnâ??t raise much money. Iâ??m trying to figure out what else we can do.â?•



She simply wanted better, said Mary Crenshaw, who grew up in segregated southern Alabama.

Growing up, Crenshaw loved athletics. She got to know baseball by listening to games on the radio with her Dad. â??In those days, before Title IX, there werenâ??t many competitive sports open to girls. We played a little basketball in high school, but that was discontinued two years into my time there.â?•

Crenshaw also does informal outreach as â??ambassadorâ?• for the YMCAâ??s programs, for which she receives a stipend and she makes recommendations for speakers at its monthly Senior Lunch and Learn Program. She tried to organize a clean-up-the-streets campaign, but it was difficult to find committed people. â??There was a lot of burnout.â?•

She also makes use of the Yâ??s programs for herself. She exercises at the Yâ??s gym with women of a similar age. â??We meet first and talk. I do the elliptical machine, which is easier on my knees than the treadmill.â?• She takes a gardening class after exercise on Tuesdays. â??We learn how to grow organic vegetables, which we do at our two dedicated beds at Candlestick Park.â?•

Another organization Crenshaw gives her time to is The Network for Elders, a neighborhood nonprofit in Bayview Hunters Point, that provides educational, social, volunteer and individualized case management services for seniors and their families. â??We come together once a month to hear presentations on subjects relevant to our health and well-being.â?• Two recent programs focused on hearing loss and how to take action in emergencies.

Accustomed to segregation

â??Sometimes Re-Building Together comes out to Network meetings. They help low-income people deal with the maintenance of their home, such as mending fences, backyard clean-up and painting.â?• Network for Elders meets in the Dr. George W. Davis Senior Center, completed in June 2016, a state-of-the-art 15,000 square-foot facility, co-located with 120 units of housing for seniors and people with disabilities. Crenshaw is chair of its social committee. â??Every third month we celebrate birthdays with a potluck.â?•

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Crenshaw grew up in Forest Home, Ala., but because it was an unincorporated area was bused 14 miles east to Greenville for school. â??There was a white kidsâ?? bus that went right by my house, but I had to wait for the black kidsâ?? bus that took us to the black segregated school. You really donâ??t think too much about it; itâ??s what youâ??re accustomed to.â?•

She was able to attend university thanks to scholarships from the Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star, to which her parents belonged. She also got help from her high school teachersâ?? association.

Alabama State University in Montgomery was Americaâ??s first state-supported educational institution for blacks. Montgomery and other cities in Alabama were later the site for civil rights protests.

â??During my college years, from 1960 to 1964, there were demonstrations and sit-ins in Alabama,â?• she said. â??In Birmingham, there was the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, where those four black girls were killed, and at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Governor Wallace tried to prevent the first two black students from entering the university.â?•

The Great March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was in 1963.

But Crenshaw said she kept a low-profile â?? her eye was on her college diploma. And physical education won out as her major due to an instructor she called a â??mean motor scooterâ?• who turned her off to math.

Mentor to young Alabama women

After graduating in 1964, Crenshaw taught physical education at a high school in Thomasville, Ala., a town whose average population was 3,400. â??Those years were fruitful, very great.â?•

Crenshaw taught young women just seven to eight years younger than herself. She is still in touch with two of them; one had tracked her down many years after graduating. â??She wrote me a check for $1,000 to fly to their school reunion.â?•

She relocated to San Francisco in the summer of 1969. A friend had moved here and implored her to come. And her brother was working in San Jose. While still working in Alabama, she traveled to the city and applied for a job in the San Francisco Unified School District. When she arrived back in San Francisco for her interview, she was hired to teach physical education in the James Denman Middle School in the Outer Mission.

And thatâ??s where she spent her 35-year career teaching physical education, teaching girlsâ?? badminton, tennis, soccer, and speedball. She coached girlsâ?? volleyball, softball, basketball and co-ed track and field. She also taught nutrition and classes on the muscular and skeletal systems.

â??I taught math for a minute, but I didnâ??t like grading papers.â?•

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