

TURNING POINT

Pride and Joy

An author's career, born out of a mother's love and devotion

By TONI MORRISON

OF ALL THE GIFTS my mother gave me, the best one was letting me have the life she had wanted for herself. That life, I learned as a teenager, could involve marriage, but something else was to come first. It was college, followed by a "good job." Later, as my mother promised, I'd have plenty of time for a family of my own.

It was a powerful aspiration and a surprising one, given the circumstances of my upbringing. Except for an uncle who'd spent a year in college, no one else in my family had even gone past high school. Being from Lorain, Ohio, made it even more difficult for me to envision the life my mother had in mind for me. My gritty hometown, situated on Lake Erie, was known for producing streetcar tracks, ships and the resulting orange clouds spewing from its smokestacks. There, manual labor usually trumped education.

The truth is, I hadn't thought much about life after high school, even though I was an excellent student and a voracious reader. I was a popular girl and thought I was just the best dancer. To such bands as the Honey Drippers and Louis Jordan and his Tympani Five, I'd try out new steps for the jitterbug, the sand and other dances. I'd also daydream about boys and clothes and moving away from home to,

well, anywhere. Cleveland, maybe, or even Chicago. I didn't have a plan.

But my mother sure did. And she let me know that college could be in my future, that the means would be available. It was something she had wanted for herself, I realize now. My mother, born Ella Ramah Willis, or Mamma, as I called her, had married my father George Wofford in her early 20s. By the time I was born in 1931, she was 25 and had been a mother for two years; two more babies would follow.

If my ebullient and astute mother had had more choices, my guess is she would have established herself as a singer, as her voice resembled Ella Fitzgerald's. When I was a child, I remember, she'd had a taste of a public life and enjoyed it. Once, she performed in a production of the opera *Carmen* in Cleveland. And, regularly,

she would sing for visiting politicians.

At Howard University in Washington, I earned my degree with a major in English and a minor in the classics. I was the beneficiary not only of my mother's longing and my parents' generosity and sacrifice but also of a black tradition at the time that favored investing in daughters. The reasoning went, black girls could go on to be teachers or nurses or even doctors and not be threatening to white men.

My mother did live to see me win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. But she participated even more fully in my earlier success. When I started getting notices for my fiction while I was still an editor at Random House, she became the keeper of all clippings, boasted about "my daughter, the writer" and gladly obliged inquiring journalists. It was a mother-proud thing.

In the way we can—sometimes unexpectedly—return favors to those we care about, I gave back to my mother some of what she had so lovingly and freely given me. Through her, my world opened up with a vividness I couldn't have imagined as a 15-year-old in Lorain. And through me, I'm gratified to say, my mother finally had the public life she'd always wanted. —As told to Michelle Lodge



TIMOTHY GREENFIELD SANDERS



*** OUT IN FRONT**
Morrison, née
Chloe Wofford,
far left, was
class treasurer
in high school