



## **Read below: An Excerpt of Chapter 1 With the Grace of Grandmothers**

“Nita Wiggins taught us that we can do anything we put our minds to despite the obstacles or unfair treatment that may come our way.”

— **Carmesha Blackmon**, *student, Bennett College, Greensboro, North Carolina*

“Civil Rights Baby spurred captivating conversations in my book club.”

— **Christina Howell**, *Founder of Memoir Mentors*

## **CIVIL RIGHTS BABY**

**My Story of Race, Sports, and Breaking Barriers  
in American Journalism**

**Nita Wiggins**

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### **A Word to the Reader**

I am guided by a desire to create empathy by showing the sameness of people at their most human level. The same journalistic integrity that I took into the job of telling the stories of other people’s lives I employed as the author of this book.

I do not intend this to be an Afrocentric perspective in competition with a Eurocentric perspective. Rather, I intend to deliver an honest, personal view at a time when women’s stories and black women’s stories are being recognized as a missing element in explaining a place or a time period. More than one year has passed since the abominable, videotaped police murder of George Floyd committed by then-officer Derek Michael Chauvin in Minneapolis in the U.S. It is nearly four years since Me Too statements exposed the crushing domination of (mostly) women by higher-placed men in the movie and television industries around the world. *Civil Rights Baby* inspires a necessary contemplation of the accompanying paradigm shifts.

A reader from Uganda says that this story mirrors “what most of us women experience.” For that reason, I repeatedly use the generic descriptor “white male.” Some readers may interpret that as a sign of resentment, but most readers would recognize the need to know the race and gender of the person who pulls the strings of power in different settings in this narrative. I use race descriptors for

most people in my story (except sports figures, celebrities, scholars, doctors, and my family members).

In addition, I use race descriptors because the default race in my America is the white race. Most written narratives in our country do not identify a character's race when that character is white. That assumes white is the norm. The parallel in the internet age would be comparing what we call the "white race" to the Google search engine—something so all-encompassing and ever-present that we must point out when it is not present. However, that premise is not accurate. Not all readers, American or otherwise, envision white as the default. So, other than the exceptions listed above, throughout this book I note when the person is white just as I do when the person is not white.

More directly, an early reader mistakenly believed a heroic person in my story to be white, while picturing an uninspired medical technician in my story to be black. The reverse is the truth. Regardless of which person is heroic and which is uninspired, I am presenting for you my life and the people who affected me in the truest distillation that my writing will allow.

*Nita Wiggins, Paris,  
July 2021*

## **Chapter 1**

### **With the Grace of Grandmothers**

"Nita and Daddy will watch tomato cans box!" my brother Ronald, a teenager at the time, playfully pointed out. Three years younger than I, Ronald was not ridiculing my father and me and our shared activity; he was simply stating a fact.

In boxing terminology, a "tomato can" is an unskilled or not-yet-developed boxer. Observers of the sport expect a tomato can to lose to the hot boxer who is on his way to a title shot. At the root of the expression is the belief that it's easy to knock over a tomato can. As my younger brother's teasing remark revealed, my father and I would spend many hours watching these lesser fighters on television.

Ronald himself liked sports. He played basketball and baseball on teams that our dad coached at the Warren Road recreation center near our home in Augusta, Georgia. Ron watched football, basketball, some golf, and a few other sports on TV, even boxing. But he drew the line at tomato cans.

That gave me an open shot at my dad's time and attention. I capitalized on this opportunity during my formative years, using sports as the glue. As a six-year-old, I sat at his elbow nearly eight hours on Sundays during football season, watching NFL games. He asked me to predict the winners and explain my reasons. No matter what I said—whether I named player injuries, team inexperience, or coaching changes as the basis for my reason—he allowed me to state my views and support them. He would listen intently and then would offer his own ideas—sometimes, the same ones I had expressed, but in grown-up words. I would use those words in my next go-round.

Another wonderful thing my dad did was give me a role in Ronald's baseball games.

"Keep count of the balls and strikes. OK?" Dad said when he gave me my new assignment.

In 1975, a girl usually could get no closer than the bleacher seats for a boys' baseball game. To fulfill the role Daddy had given me, I was still confined to the bleachers, but I had a choice location—the area directly behind home plate, where I could clearly monitor the umpire and catcher.

Better than my location on the field, though, was the instrument I held in my hands to carry out Daddy's order. I remember the first time he handed me the piece of molded black plastic. A pitch score counter!—maybe a Spalding or Franklin brand. It was small, tiny enough to fit snugly inside my eleven-year-old hand. It felt like gold. Unblinkingly, I would watch the pitches thrown and use my plastic palm mechanism to click *ball* or *strike* as signaled by the umpire.

Truthfully, my assignment served no real purpose, as far as the game was concerned, though I did not know it at the time. I kept myself ready to yell out the pitch count in case the coach—my daddy!—looked to me, needing reliable information in a split-second. My job linked me to Dad during the games. Linked us symbolically. The wire fence along the first and third baselines, and the sport's gender-based rules, physically separated us. The man-made barriers kept me from being where I wanted to be during the games: at my father's elbow.



My father's hands-on mentoring was the greatest factor that shaped me, but later in life I realized the important role my hard-working, churchgoing grandmothers played in forming the woman I had become. I gained this appreciation for my grandmothers, and for all such early-20th-century black women, because of a career perk that I deeply enjoyed.

National Football League teams negotiate attractive hotel group rates for players, coaches, and the traveling media members who cover road games. This meant that when I covered an NFL team as a Fox-affiliate reporter, I often flew on the team's chartered plane and slept in the finest hotels. Philadelphia's French-themed Sofitel was my favorite, but I also enjoyed assorted Radissons, Westins, and Ritz-Carltons. With the one-thousand-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets and the goose-feather down pillows, I always felt like I was sleeping on a cloud.

As the luxurious Saturday nights spent in America's fine hotels became commonplace for me, I absorbed and felt gratitude for the divine grace that had smiled on the women of my generation. What fortunate creatures we were, to be able to sleep in settings fit for queens. But even as I relished the luxury, in the hallways of the hotels I would occasionally encounter the women who cleaned the beautifully appointed suites.

The women who cleaned the rooms but likely could not afford to sleep in them.

In the last two or three years of my American career, I took on the habit of carefully tidying up after myself before leaving the hotels to return home. I threw away all newspapers and scribbled notes, as well as the sales tags from purchases I had made. I finished by wiping down the marble bathroom sinks. I added these practices to what I had already done for years when I stayed in hotels: using just one towel and one washcloth, with the objective of cutting down on unnecessary laundering and water use. The other towels remained untouched so that no work was required to ready them for the next guest. If I stayed for several nights on a road trip, I would leave the *Do Not Disturb* sign hanging outside until I closed the door behind me for the last time. I did not want any servicing done to the room because I was trying to lighten the load for the woman who would eventually come in to clean the room.

I had a private reason for doing so.

At the time, I was a central figure in a world that, to outsiders, must have seemed glamorous. A world of bright studio lights and television cameras and celebrity athletes. A world in which I moved within a privileged entourage in and out of the lobbies of elegant hotels. A world in which deferring bellhops quickly relieved us of our luggage, and room cleaners readily supplied us with practical comforts. To these hotel staffers, I must have seemed worlds removed from their life experience.

But the reality was that my grandmothers had earned money by cleaning up behind other people.

As I became increasingly sensitive to the vast differences between my life and that of my dear foremothers, I began to see the hotel cleaning ladies as modern-day versions of my industrious grandmothers.

Malinda Lott, my maternal grandmother, was born in 1916 and worked for wealthy white families in Macon, Georgia. She chose to work because she wanted her own spending money, something separate from my grandfather's construction salary. On the other hand, my paternal grandmother, Bernice Wiggins, whom we called "Boo Mama," had to work. She cleaned motel rooms in Pensacola, Florida, after she and my grandfather divorced. She was born in 1913.

My grandmothers' employment options were limited largely because of the times in which they lived. During the first half of the 20th century, most working black women in the United States were laborers or servers. Though I have black friends whose grandparents attended college, mine did not.

My grandfather James Lott built homes, and my other grandfather, Walter Wiggins, worked in railroad construction. Their jobs paid well enough for them to provide financial security for their families, but the work was hard. They died at ages fifty-six and fifty-three, respectively, while my grandmothers lived nearly forty years longer.

My maternal grandmother, whom I called "Grandmama," lived long enough to see a black man inaugurated as president of the United States in January 2009. She noted Senator Barack Obama's victory with pride because, living her entire life in the Southern part of the country, she had seen her share of racial subjugation. Despite this, Grandmama found joy with her family, her friends, and her church. In true Southern-grandmother fashion, she cooked a sumptuous and generous turkey dinner for the family at Thanksgiving and at Christmas. She doted on me even after I became an adult.

When I worked at WMGT in Macon, where Grandmama resided, I enjoyed Sunday dinners with her from the spring of 1986 to the autumn of 1987. She beamed happily whenever I drove her to church in my low-riding Mustang. I would stay to listen to the sermons, but mostly I watched her. Seated in the front row as a leader in the church, she would glance back to see if I were following the message.

Every time I attended church with her, Grandmama would insist I submit a visitor's card so that the preacher could call on me to stand and receive the greeting of the churchgoers. After the service, Grandmama would introduce me to her church friends as her granddaughter *and* the woman on WMGT—in that order. The people I met said that my TV station would be the one they would watch in their homes from that point on.

Those were good times in Grandmama's church. I was in my first job as a television reporter; I had not yet faced having my aspirations cast aside by those who challenged my ability to perform my role. I felt my grandmother's unconditional love for me and the satisfaction of knowing that she was proud of what I had become at age twenty-two. And I felt the approval of her congregation friends. Later, when the going got tough in my career, part of what kept me burning to succeed was the memory of the people in Grandmama's church. So many good-hearted, solid, sincere, and well-meaning people who were happy that someone they knew had touched a dream that was previously inaccessible for black people.

With a foundation that sturdy, the strength of Southern black people and their altruistic hopes, I was fortified to face the on-the-job discrimination that was coming my way. I did not know it at the time, but like my grandmother's determination, I would need a resolve that could not be bent.

**More about 2021's new *Civil Rights Baby* at [www.nitawiggins.com](http://www.nitawiggins.com)**