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Early Years

"I learned very early that work was not a dirty four-letter word."

I guess I should start at the beginning. I was born Genevieve Marie Guidroz to Gertrude Acosta and James Yoric Guidroz on August 7, 1932, in Berwick, Louisiana, a little town about 100 miles south of New Orleans. I am the youngest of six children—two boys, Edwin James ("Bobby") and Leonard Louis (nicknamed "Red" because of the color of his hair), and four girls: Verna Louise, Elsie Rita, Gertrude Marie ("Trudy"), and me. We were all born approximately two years apart, with Verna being the firstborn, followed by Bobby, Elsie, Red, Trudy, and me, in that order.

I grew up in New Orleans. It was not the best of times economically for our country, because we were still suffering from the Great Depression. For our family, necessities were scarce and luxuries were not an option, to say the least. That condition was not due to a lack of ambition or hard work on my father's part, but instead was a result of the times. There were periods when Daddy held three jobs at once in order to keep the wolf away from the door. He worked as a carpenter, a bartender, a riverboat pilot, and a laborer unloading cargo boats on the riverfront. I remember one of his bosses coming

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for dinner at our home. I sat there listening as he told my mother, "I wish I had 20 more workers like Mose—he does the work of *three men*." Daddy was always known as Captain Mose; no one called him by his given name, including my mother. He could navigate the narrowest waterways and dock a boat as easily as we park our cars. Perhaps that explains how he earned the moniker "Captain Mose."

Daddy often reminded us later in life of those hard times. He'd say, "People often refer to the 'good ole days' when one could buy a pound of beans for a nickel and a telephone call cost a nickel . . . but what they fail to remember is that no one had the nickel!" I guess that was the bad news of my early days, but it was also partly the good news in my development and work ethic. I learned very early that *work* was not a dirty four-letter word. Work not only provided people subsistence, but also gave them a sense of pride and accomplishment.

I find it interesting that by today's standards we would have been considered to be poor. Yet, I don't ever recall feeling poor or disadvantaged. There was nothing else to compare our lifestyle to; everyone we knew was in the same boat.

The phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" was introduced after World War II when most people were trying to build a new life for themselves. Displaying bigger and better material possessions was a way of telling your neighbors, "Look at me, I'm successful." In the early days of my youth, the "Joneses" were no better off than the Smiths or the Johnsons, not in *my* neighborhood anyway.

New Orleans has always been a city that is steeped in tradition. Celebrating Mardi Gras is one of those traditions that people practiced from early childhood. It was my favorite holiday, because we got to enjoy it for a whole week. As children, we would walk to Canal Street to watch each evening parade and catch beads and doubloons that were thrown from the colorful floats by costumed and masked revelers. Our house was about five miles from Canal Street, but walking with a large group of friends was so much fun that it seemed much shorter. I can remember each of us watching

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the parades and yelling, "Throw me something, *mister*," never really knowing if the costumed and masked person on the float was male or female. It is the common cry of all parade watchers hoping to take home a cache of treasures as proof of their success.

Another custom of the Mardi Gras season was the "king cake" party. Starting in early January, each month someone in our circle of friends would invite us to a party and serve a cake that had a tiny doll hidden inside. The person who unexpectedly got the doll had to give the next party. The cakes are shaped like a racetrack oval, with multicolored icing on top; some are made with cream cheese and/or fruit fillings that are quite delicious. Many of the local bakeries produce these cakes as they are part of a much-practiced celebration and are in great demand. The tradition of king cake parties would continue throughout each month until Mardi Gras day. Although I enjoyed the parties and I loved eating the cakes, with each bite, I can remember praying that I wouldn't get the doll so I wouldn't have to give the next party, because I knew my family could ill afford the extra cost.

Even though it was not the best of times, I still have many fond memories of the years we spent there. It was a real neighborhood. We all knew each other and were there to offer support when needed.

And in spite of the hard work my father had to endure, I never heard him once complain or present a "poor me" attitude. It was our custom to always have dinner together as a family every day. When Daddy came home from work, he would wash up, then kiss each one of us; then we would sit down at the table and talk about the happenings of the day. He was always interested in what we learned in school. I think one of the reasons he was so determined for us to get good educations was that he never had much of a formal education. In spite of the fact that his mother had taught school and was an avid student of Shakespeare (thus explaining his middle name *Yoric*), he never got to benefit from her formal education.

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When his father was killed in World War I, he and his older brother had to leave school to support the family. I believe Daddy was in eighth grade at the time. I don't believe his mother spent much time continuing his education. What he learned, he learned on his own.

I find it sad that Daddy didn't have the benefit of a formal education, because he was very intelligent and he would have been a bright student. He could do math in his head quicker than anyone I've known. We would give him three or four figures to add, subtract, or multiply, and in an instant he'd give us the answer. He also proved to be an astute businessman later in life. At one time or another he owned restaurants, bars, and shrimp boats, and he leased crew boats to the oil companies. He was also an accomplished boat captain.

While we sat at the table recounting our experiences of the day, my mother was busy warming the food she had cooked earlier. She was always sure to have dinner ready when he got home, partly because sometimes dinner was between Daddy's jobs and he had little time to eat, and partly because my father was a taskmaster. He demanded certain things of his household. Having dinner ready when *he* was ready was one of them. Many times I heard my mother say to him, "You're working so hard I worry about you," and his standard reply was, "Hard work never killed anybody," a phrase that is ingrained in my subconscious. I grew up believing that if you didn't work hard, you would die young (a concept with some credibility).

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I have always been grateful for the early lessons I learned about the value of work. I attribute any success I have achieved to my willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done. I don't be-

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lieve I'm smarter or more talented than most people, but I can work as hard and as long as the best of them.

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I believe that most people today work only for the material benefits and miss or ignore the true enjoyment of doing something that is productive and that builds character. Image and ego seem to be the driving forces behind many achievers today. I don't mean to generalize but only to point out the difference in attitudes that develop as a result of the times, the opportunities available, and the rewards they offer. So in many ways my attitude toward work was developed at a very young age. My husband Sid has often said to me, "You were bred to work." Perhaps he's right.

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Among many values I learned while growing up is the value of honesty. My dad hated a liar. If someone he knew lied, he'd say, "That guy would rather climb a tree to tell a lie than stand on the ground and tell the truth," meaning, of course, that the man went out of his way to lie. As children and as adults, we could never lie to my father. Knowing how he felt and looking into his eyes, we could tell that truth was our only option.

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In those days, parents didn't have to consult books to know how and when to discipline their children. The criteria were simple: If you exhibited wrong or unacceptable behavior, expect consequences. To say that my father was strict would be like saying the Pacific Ocean is a small pond. There were rules in the household and we knew better than to break them.

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We all had chores that we regularly did without question. Trudy and I were responsible for clean dishes. After each evening meal, we would wash and dry the dishes. We took turns as to who washed and who dried. There was never a discussion about *if* we should do it, only *who* did what. My brother Red was responsible for taking out the garbage and for cutting the grass. Elsie did a lot of the ironing and mending. Verna helped Mama with the washing, which was done with the old wringer-type washing machine, and the only dryer was the outside clothesline. Household chores were not so automated in those days, and although washing and cleaning took many more hours, there were some benefits. I still love the smell of wind-dried linens that have been kissed by sunshine.

Despite the rules and as strict as my dad was, we all knew we were loved. And only once did I see my father strike one of his children. One day when he was returning home in between jobs, he passed my brother Red's school. There was Red sitting in the yard smoking. Daddy didn't do anything then, but later that evening he asked Red if he had been smoking and Red answered, "No, sir." My

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father then told him what he had seen and gave him a chance to reconsider his answer.

After Red admitted he had smoked "just to see what it was like," Daddy took him into the bathroom, pulled down his pants, and gave him a spanking. I could hear the whacks as I stood outside the bathroom door crying because I thought Daddy would hurt him. Later Red said the only thing Daddy hurt was his pride. I think deep down the spanking was more for lying than for smoking because, to Daddy, lying was the most unforgivable sin. Obviously this incident left a lasting impression even though it didn't happen to me.

Actually, Daddy was very proud of his family. I don't ever remember having a baby-sitter. My parents took us everywhere they went, all six of us. And we all had to perform whenever we visited a friend's home. Elsie would sing solo (she had a beautiful voice). She sang on the radio for the 7-Up program. Red would tap-dance "Two Tickets to Georgia," then Trudy and I would close the act with a duet of "God Bless America." We all still laugh at what the audience must have thought. They probably said, "Oh God, here come those untalented Guidroz kids again," but we never guessed it at the time. We had fun, we were happy to be included in all the activities, and we appreciated the accolades of encouragement, even if they were false. It helps to understand that there was very little available to entertain people in those days. Catching fireflies could happily occupy an entire evening. So I guess even bad entertainment was endurable.

In any case, having to perform was good training for me because as a result I have never feared public speaking as I understand most people do. When my children were young, they saw me singing and dancing alone throughout the house and judging by their laughter and the looks they gave me, they must have thought their mother was strange. I still love to sing and dance! Like all kids, I was motivated by what I saw in the movies: I could see myself as

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the kind of woman in roles played by Katharine Hepburn and Hedy Lamarr. Those women always had gorgeous silk gowns and silk bed linens, and I thought, "Oh, that looks so beautiful—one day I'm going to have those." And I have fulfilled that dream.

There's nothing specific I can remember about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I don't think women then even considered the kinds of careers that women have today. And the same is true of me. I don't think even my mother could have envisioned the extent of my success, because women just weren't in business in those days—business careers for women were just nonexistent. Society has evolved to such an extent that now they have become the norm.

I do remember that when I was really little, I told Mama I would like to be a nun, and I saw her eyes light up. I think nothing would have pleased her more than to have one of her children as a member of the Church. Ours was a very Catholic household: My mother had a small altar, and every day she would kneel before it and pray. She attended Mass every Sunday and every holy day of obligation. Of course, we children all went along. She insisted we attend Catholic school and practice good Christian values.

Sometimes Trudy and I would pretend to be nuns and pin a towel on our heads to resemble a nun's habit. We would then pretend to teach school, because all our teachers were nuns, and we figured that that was their only role in life. Sometimes we pretended the other did something naughty, and we reprimanded each other with a ruler whack on the knuckles. My aspirations of becoming a nun changed once I discovered boys were not just pesky little dorks but were kind of cute.

I also liked to ride horses, so maybe I saw myself as Dale Evans. At one time, I thought I might be a singer on the stage like Ethel Merman. I didn't have a belting, booming voice like she did, but I thought maybe it would develop as I got older! Even now, when Sid and I go to the Derby in Kentucky and

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everyone sings "My Old Kentucky Home," people sometimes turn to me and say, "Gee, you have a nice voice." I still like to sing, but the only singing I do now is at the races and at Christmastime, singing carols.

Sometimes my own children question me about my childhood. My failure to respond with a lot of detailed accounts of my life back then prompts them to think I just don't wish to revisit those years. What they don't understand is that life was so mundane and unmemorable that there weren't many events that left lasting impressions. Any memories I do have are all of a happy childhood.

When I was growing up, we didn't take exotic trips or go to places like Universal City, Disneyland, Toys 'R' Us or any such entertainment destinations. They didn't exist.

Our big day was Saturday when we were given a nickel to see a movie at the Bijou Theatre. After we were bathed and neatly dressed, we'd sit on the front steps with a clean handkerchief and a nickel waiting for the time to go. My brother, Red, was the one who took Trudy (who is two years older than I) and me to the movies.

Because there was no TV when I was growing up, the Bijou as entertainment was to us what TV, DVDs, computer games, and CDs are to today's generation. When we were at home, our only entertainment was the radio. The whole family would gather around the woodstove in the kitchen and listen to programs like *Inner Sanctum*, *We the People*, and *Mr. District Attorney*. No one talked; we sat there in silence and listened attentively while our imaginations visualized the scenes that were being enacted.

At the Bijou, we watched pictures of fun lifestyles with luxuries that come with achievement and success. I remember seeing silk sheets and beautiful lingerie in those black-and-white B movies and thinking, "One day I'll be rich and successful and I'll have silk sheets, too." Those images gave us hope and dreams of better

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things to come. We would talk among ourselves on the way home about our goals and dreams for the future.

Still, at the time, my brothers and sisters and I felt blessed when my dad took us twice a year to buy new clothes. We girls got a new outfit at Easter, and three dresses and one pair of shoes if we needed them at the beginning of each school year. We got one gift at Christmas—and we cherished it. We made our own ornaments for our Christmas tree with simple things like popcorn, paper link chains, and colored eggshells, the contents of which had been sucked out by my mother.

My favorite gift one year was a pair of roller skates. They were the kind you adjust with a skate key that usually hung around my neck on a string. I had them for years because as my foot grew, I could adjust the size. I can still recall learning to roller-skate. I was so thin that the skates felt like they weighed 50 pounds. When I finally got used to the feeling, roller-skating became my favorite thing to do. I remember thinking, "This is the closest thing to flying through the air."

I always wished for a bike, but throughout my whole childhood, I never owned one. The main reason was my dad's fear that we would get hurt, or worse, killed. He had almost killed a kid on a bike one day when he was on his way home. The boy had darted out in front of his car so fast that he couldn't keep from hitting the boy. Thankfully, the boy wasn't seriously hurt, but the incident left an indelible memory. Bobby, my oldest brother, was my only sibling lucky enough to have a bike. The reason he was singled out was because he was able to get a job delivering prescriptions for the local drugstore. The job required the delivery boy to have a bike, so my dad relented, first because the extra income would help, and second, he believed that every man (boy) should learn to be a provider.

When I was about five, I begged my brother to give me a ride on his bike. Reluctantly, he agreed to do so. It was close to Easter

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Sunday so I had on my new, cute little red sandals. I was sitting on the handlebars and when Bobby made a turn, my foot got caught in the spokes of the bike. I screamed and I think my brother turned white as a sheet. My shoe was all mangled and I was crying (more because of my new shoes than from any pain). We were both afraid to go home. Luckily, Daddy wasn't home when we got there. As she often did, Mama covered for us, and I don't think he ever found out. His knowing about it would have further ensured that a bike was not in my future. Actually, his concerns turned out to be well-founded. One day while delivering prescriptions, my brother was hit by a car. He suffered a skull fracture, but he recovered rather quickly. That incident cemented a bikeless future for the rest of us kids.

I find it interesting that whenever I pleaded for a bike, my dad would buy me a watch. Watches cost about \$12 back then, the same price as a bike. I think he wanted me to know that it wasn't the *money* that kept him from granting my wish, but his concern for my safety.

It was around my freshman year in high school that, after 35 years of marriage, my parents divorced. I was the only one of their children who hadn't married, and my mother and I lived together next door to my older sister Elsie. I guess like most children of divorced parents, I never quite understood why my parents decided to call it quits after so many years. I know they loved each other because in later years Daddy told me that, even though he had remarried, he never loved anyone as much as my mother.

When my mother was very sick and the doctor kept telling us she would not last, she would suddenly rally again. This went on for over a month and finally her doctor asked, "Is there someone she's waiting to see?" The only person we could think of was Daddy. He was living in Texas, so I called him and asked him to come see her. Two days later he was there. When he went into her room, we all walked out so that they could be alone. For about 20

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minutes, whatever they talked about—those were the last words Mama spoke. She went into a coma shortly after he left and died the next morning. So I have to believe that she loved him till the end and perhaps she wanted to tell him that.

Mama had been a beautiful redhead with brown eyes. Her skin was like porcelain, without a mark on it. She never went out into the sun. She would wear a hat and cover her face with a scarf when she hung out the laundry. When I'd come home sunburned in my efforts to achieve a tan, she'd ask, "Why would you want to punish your body like that?" It was beyond her comprehension that someone would deliberately expose themselves to the sun when she did everything she could to avoid it. She must have been a real beauty when she was young. It was painful to see her in her last days as her hair suddenly turned gray and she became rail thin, her cheeks sunken.

She married Daddy when she was 17 years old. He was a tall, handsome brunette. Actually he was only six feet, but that was considered tall at the time. He had a wonderful zest for life. His eyes were grayish green with the twinkle of a rogue. Everyone liked him immediately. He was the kind of guy who would walk into a bar and if he saw someone he knew he'd immediately send over a drink, even in hard times. He was always generous with his money and his love. He never passed up an opportunity to help a friend, and throughout his life he helped many. Daddy died in 1985 at the age of 86.

Some people say that children today don't get the same quality education as did the students of the so-called "great generation." I have often wondered: If it *is* true, then is it because of all the outside distractions? We had much more time to study and it was easier to focus, because there were not a lot of other things to think about. Back then, the consequences for not complying with the rules were far greater from the teachers and from the parents. Today, teachers are so constrained with dos and don'ts that they're afraid to discipline a student.

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I am thankful for the discipline I received during my school years, even if I didn't like it at the time. After interviewing hundreds of applicants for job positions, I have found that many people who have college diplomas can't read and write. Their misspelled words, poor grammar, and illegible penmanship confirm that there are some graduates who didn't *earn* that piece of paper. Incoherent answers to written questions lead me to believe that they didn't learn how to read, either. How sad for them that they will be deprived of one of the greatest joys and bountiful pleasures in life.

I believe one of the reasons ours has been called "the great generation" is that we all learned at an early age that responsibility, hard work, and sacrifice were not an option, but an accepted obligation if we wanted to live in a free society.

Many teachers also underestimate the value of praise. I remember one day my second-grade teacher, Miss Honold, was going to mount a pencil sharpener inside a cabinet. Just as she was about to screw it down, I pointed out that there wasn't enough room for the pencil to fit—apparently she had considered only the space needed for the sharpener, forgetting that the pencil would need room, too. She smiled and said, "You're absolutely right. What a smart girl you are." She patted me on the head, and then announced to the class that I had saved her from making a mistake. I remember feeling embarrassed at the time, but I also felt important. Isn't it interesting that after 60 plus years I still remember that seemingly insignificant event? Oh, the power of praise!

I always liked school. I was a good student because I enjoyed learning new things. Even to this day, I enjoy reading about what's happening all over the world. I enjoy learning a new language or traveling to places I've read about. I hope I never lose my curiosity to discover new things. I sometimes worry that the children today have so much "stuff" that they take everything for granted and goal setting is a foreign exercise to them. With all the virtual reality and cyberspace activity, I worry that children aren't getting enough hu-

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man interaction. We learn a lot from interaction with people and from watching the behavior of others in real-life situations. It is important in preparing us to be active participants in society.

Later in life and many years after I finished high school, I did take college courses at night in nutrition and management, and at different times classes in anthropology and French. I took them only for audit, at the University of Chicago, in the early 1970s. Because of my demanding work schedule, I had to drop them. I was working such long hours. I took these courses because I've always believed in education for education's sake; I don't believe that education has anything to do with success in business, and history has proven that time and again: Many people who have been really successful didn't complete their formal education.

Moreover, throughout my whole life, I have always educated myself. During my entire career, whenever I could read a book that I thought would enhance my understanding of the industry or business, I would buy it and read it.

A Waif of a Child

My sisters and brothers and I all had nicknames for each other. We called my oldest sister, Verna, "Freckles" whenever we wanted to annoy her, because she was self-conscious about her freckles. Our teasing certainly didn't help her to accept them. Elsie, my second oldest sister, was "Cora," after a very unattractive woman we knew. When we wanted to tease her, we'd call her Cora because Elsie was so beautiful; it was the ultimate insult. When we wanted to tease Red, we would call him "Marie Goog" after a crazy woman we knew. That would really upset him, making us feel that our goal was accomplished.

Trudy's nickname was the worst, though, because we sometimes called her "Fatso." She was on the plump side and Mama

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had to buy her clothes in a "chubby" size. Somehow Bobby escaped uncomplimentary nicknames, and my nickname was "Fenon," a French word whose meaning is not quite clear. In spite of the teasing and name calling, we all loved each other and we remained close until long after we all married and even after some of us moved away. In fact, I worked with two of my sisters, Trudy and Elsie, in several businesses.

In contrast to Trudy, I was teased unmercifully about my frail body. I was a waif of a child. My dad would prepare a drink of milk, raw eggs, vanilla, and who knows what else for me every day. It's a wonder I didn't grow up to be a hypochondriac because Mama often said, "I know that child must have TB—she's too thin." Actually, I was very healthy. Perhaps the daily dose of cod liver oil helped, but I don't think I even had frequent colds. Cod liver oil is very unpleasant, but I got so used to taking it that I would actually remind my mother when it was time for my daily dose. I guess the saying "You can even get used to hanging by your thumbs if you hang *long* enough" is true.

Being so thin had other disadvantages. Because Trudy was a chubby kid, she needed to get new shoes more often than me. Due to her excess weight, her shoes would wear out much faster. On the other hand, mine seemed to never wear out. I remember returning home from school after a rain, walking the whole distance in the gutter where the rain had collected, so I would ruin my shoes enough to warrant new ones. I don't think I ever wore out a pair of shoes. The only time I got new school shoes was when my feet were too large for the old ones or at the start of each school year.

We were well fed as children, too, but we ate healthy meals, though my mama did cook with butter. That was the norm back then—nobody knew then what effect butter had on your cholesterol. We didn't even know the word *cholesterol* at the time! But we always ate fresh foods. My mama's whole life was her family: She cooked three meals a day and left the house only to walk to the

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corner grocery store when we weren't available to do it for her. She had a vegetable garden and she raised chickens. Her meals often consisted of different ways of preparing chicken and fresh vegetables. I can still see her wringing the chicken's neck while explaining to us that it was the most painless and humane way to kill a chicken for cooking. Mama was so gentle, we knew she wouldn't do anything to hurt an animal. She tried to avoid having us see her do her "dirty work," but sometimes it was unavoidable, so she did her best to explain why it was necessary.

One Easter, we were given baby ducklings that became pets. As they grew, they would try to fly over our fence. One day, they disappeared and caused us to wonder did they really fly away as Mama said, or were they one of the tasty meals she usually prepared? I really didn't want to know.

Every morning as children, we had oatmeal for breakfast. Some days, we would be sitting and eating our oatmeal while Mama ate scrambled eggs with calf brains, which caused me to feel like gagging. That's a delicacy I still cannot convince myself to enjoy. But she loved it!

Mama insisted that we come home from school for lunch. I don't know if that was because she didn't think school meals were nutritious or fresh enough or because of the added cost. In any case, we came home to freshly made vegetable or chicken soup along with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches made with fresh-baked bread.

We lived 12 blocks from school, so we had to walk 12 blocks in the morning, 24 back and forth for lunch, then 12 to come home at the end of the school day (48 blocks total) each day. It's no wonder I was so skinny. One thing I'm sure of: Walking is an excellent exercise. It is still my personal favorite method of exercise.

Recalling my teenage years, I am reminded of how timing can make such a difference in any outcome as well as in one's perception of things. Back then, I had what today would be described as

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an ideal figure, trim and well-proportioned. However, I felt I was painfully thin and longed to have a more curvaceous body, which was the ideal at that time. When purchasing skirts or pants, the smallest waistline size available was 22 inches. I remember having to take in all the waistlines, so although I never measured my waist, I know it was smaller than 22 inches. It wasn't until Twiggy came on the scene that "thin was in." After Twiggy changed the standard, I longed to have that waistline again. From then on I thought, "Where was Twiggy when I needed her?"

For a brief time during high school, I worked for Godchaux's, a local high-end department store that catered to the elite. I was asked to model their clothes for the store's fashion shows. I've always been somewhat of a clotheshorse, so I jumped at the chance. Another "first" happened to me while I worked for Godchaux's. The powers that be urged me to enter the Miss Godchaux beauty pageant. Reluctantly I did so, and to my surprise I won the title. I think that was the first time I considered that possibly I wasn't too skinny after all.

I was then offered a modeling contract with the lingerie company Vanity Fair, but I declined the offer because I was planning to leave New Orleans with my sister Elsie. It's funny how one decision, one right turn instead of a left one, can change your whole life's course. If I had remained in New Orleans and/or taken that offer, my life would probably have gone in an entirely different direction. Perhaps the good thing about that is I will never know how life might have turned out otherwise!

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