

From Slavery to Special Assistant to the President: Hope and Blessings



My grandfather was born enslaved in Rappahannock County, Virginia on a farm around 1855. Early slave records described him as a mulatto*, i.e. mixed race toddler - he never knew his dad. We assume his dad was white.

The state of Virginia adopted the 13th amendment in February 1865. On that day, my grandfather was emancipated and became a free man. In 1890, he migrated to Youngstown, Ohio and found work in the booming steel industry. In 1901, he returned to Rappahannock County and purchased 30 acres of land and began farming.

In 1907, he married my grandmother and they had 10 children together. My dad, John Woodson Ficklin, was born in 1919 and was their seventh child.



My grandparents in the early 1900s.

My dad was 13 years old when my grandfather died and was the oldest male living at home, helping to support the family during the Great Depression.

Later, my dad decided to follow his two older siblings to Washington. D.C., 75 miles away. Dad found work in domestic service like his big brother and sister. This path was very common for African Americans who had recently migrated from the South in the early 1900s.

My uncle Charles was hired as a butler in the White House in 1939 and in 1946, my dad joined him.

My dad's career was amazing – first families, colleagues and the press loved him. My dad rose through the ranks from butler to Maître-d', the most senior butler. He served as an usher at President Kennedy's funeral at Jacqueline Kennedy's request and was the first residential staff member, not policy staff member, invited to be a guest at a state dinner.



My father, John Woodson Ficklin (second from left) and my uncle Charles (third from left) with Jacqueline Kennedy (fourth from left) and John F. Kennedy Jr. as a young child.

He worked for 9 presidents over 44 years.

My dad also shared credit with his brother for creating the legendary White House eggnog served at holiday parties, a “secret recipe” recipe you can now find on Google.

With my family’s deep ties to the White House, it has been a part of my entire life. As a child, I attended many Fourth of July cookouts, Christmas parties and spent several Saturday afternoons bowling in the White House.



Me, in my mother’s arms, and my brother at an Easter Monday celebration at the White House.

My first summer job was in the White House Messenger service. I worked as a part-time pantryman on my Dad’s staff. Dad wanted me to train as a butler because butlers made more money. But I refused to cut my afro and shave my beard, which, according to my dad, would be unacceptable for a butler at that time.

I started my career on the National Security Council staff in 1975 as the part-time evening clerk courier while taking classes during the day. I served as a director on the staff during the Clinton and G.W. Bush Administrations, and eventually, the senior director for Records and Information Management Information Security. In President Obama’s Administration, I accepted a presidential appointment to Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, which changed my employment status from career to a commissioned officer of the administration.

A former colleague on the National Security Council staff introduced me to my future wife, Patrice. The year before we married, my wife was accepted to Harvard Law School. And she introduced me to the future president and her classmate at the time, Barack Obama.



My two sons on the left, my wife Patrice and me (right) with former President Barack Obama.

As my 40th anniversary of government service was rapidly approaching, my health was not the best. I had periodic weird symptoms like neuropathy and clumsiness that no doctor could figure out.

I was ready to retire. December 31, 2015, was my last day of full time service in the federal government. But my symptoms persisted. This was the start of my discovery that I had multiple sclerosis. I was having flares.

In 2018, my symptoms became more severe. I had MRIs of my lumbar spine, blood tests and nerve conduction tests.

No answers.

By August, I was losing confidence in driving. I was dropping bottles and walking like an intoxicated man. Finally, I was curled up in bed, not wanting to do anything. In September, my doctor finally referred me to a neurologist who ordered MRIs of my brain, cervical spine, thoracic and thoracic spine.

She speculated that I might have late-stage brain cancer. After a second set of MRIs with contrast, the neurologist changed her diagnosis to possible MS and admitted me to Georgetown hospital for further testing and treatment.

Patrice and I celebrated. The neurologist asked why we were celebrating a possible MS diagnosis, and our response was, "hey, it's not brain cancer. It's good news."

My MS symptoms are now stable most days. I have a wonderful neurologist, and I'm being treated with Ocrevus.

Who could imagine MS would be a blessing? I was grateful to learn my diagnosis was not something more life-threatening. But my MS journey has brought other blessings as well.

When I was first diagnosed, I felt like I was one of the few African Americans with the disease. I did not present like the usual MS patient because I was a 60-year-old Black man.

When I attended my first Georgetown Patient Education Day in October 2018, I saw a diverse community of people living with MS – different physical abilities, people of all ages and a lot of African Americans. The realization that I was not alone brought tears to my eyes.

Another blessing is connecting with the National MS Society and the broader community of those living with MS. I discovered Bike MS in an ad in Momentum Magazine in my neurologist's office.

Now, my wife and I are currently training for our third Chesapeake Challenge and look forward to once again spending a day raising money for a great cause and connecting with the local MS community. I will continue to ride in this event for as long as I'm able.



At Bike MS: Chesapeake Challenge.

There have been many blessings in my life and in my family. The fact that in two generations, family members can go from slavery to Special Assistant to the President is indicative of the progress we've made as a country, and I'm proud of it.

I'm also proud and very optimistic about the progress being made in MS research and the search for a cure. I am elated every time I see a commercial for a new DMT on the market.

But we still have so much more to do.

I recently had a conversation with a neurologist who said that a lot of African American patients don't seek or get proper medical attention for MS until they have advanced symptoms or disabilities. I had symptoms for 12 years before my diagnosis, and I talked to my doctors frequently about them. It was not until I curled up in bed, unable to fully function, that MS was considered.

This has to stop. With more information in the Black community and among doctors about

MS, people may receive the care that they need, sooner.

Progress is possible, and I will contribute in any way I can.

Editor's Note: *Everyone has their own unique journey with MS, and The National MS Society blog strives to amplify the diverse perspectives of people in the MS movement. While this word may be sensitive to some, the author is sharing his personal journey in his own authentic words.

Find more resources and information about MS in the Black community on [the Society website](#).