

# Hope and blessings



## **My family's journey from slavery to special assistant to the president**

**by John Ficklin**

My grandfather was born enslaved in Rappahannock County, Virginia, on a farm around 1855. Early slave records described him as a "mulatto," or mixed race, toddler. He never knew his dad, but we assume his dad was white.



### **Ficklin's grandparents in the early 1900's**

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 for farming.

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

My dad was 13 years old when my grandfather died, and he became 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 John Kennedy's funeral at Jacqueline Kennedy's request and was the first residential staff member invited to be a guest at a state dinner. He worked for nine presidents over 44 years.

### **Legendary White House eggnog**

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

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 and Christmas parties and spent several Saturday afternoons bowling in 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, my dad said, would be unacceptable for a butler at that time.



**John Woodson Ficklin (second from left) with Jacqueline Kennedy (fourth from left) and John F. Kennedy Jr. as a young child.**

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 George W. Bush administrations, and eventually, the senior director for Records and Information Management Information Security. In President Barack 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.

### **Ready to retire**

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, so Dec. 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.

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

### **No answers**

By August 2018, 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.





**John Ficklin (right); his wife, Patrice; and two sons meeting with former President Barack Obama.**

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.

### **Blessings from my MS journey**

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.



**John Ficklin (third from left) with friends at a Bike MS: Chesapeake Challenge event.**

Another blessing is connecting with the National Multiple Sclerosis 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 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.

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 disease-modifying therapy (DMT).

**More work to be done**

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.

**John Ficklin was diagnosed with MS in 2018. He and his wife, Patrice, live in Maryland. They have two sons. His book about his family's history is scheduled to be out in 2023.**