

We Fought Intolerance (And We Are Still Fighting)

Gloria Williams and Ken Williams



On September 11, 2001, Vernon Paul Cherry (in photo on left), a New York City firefighter, perished in the south tower of the World Trade Center. Vernon Paul died as so many other heroic firefighters did, shepherding building occupants to safety at the risk of their own lives. Vernon Paul was a son, father, and husband, and he

was brother to Kenneth and Gloria Williams.

Fighting Discrimination Then and Now

Firstly, we do not seek vengeance against anyone. We have lived peacefully in a multicultural community for many years and certainly do not hold the Muslim community accountable for the acts of terrorism that happened on 9/11. It is our wish that whenever the persons responsible are caught, that the rule of law prevail. (See pp. 48-49.)

As we mark the tenth anniversary of this horrific occasion, we would like to offer our thoughts about the religious intolerance that has gotten worse since 9/11. Discrimination against Muslims reminds us of the discrimination we faced many years ago.

We offer these memories as a mirror to a past we do not wish to return to. Our prayers and wishes are truly for Peaceful Tomorrows.

Gloria remembers...

When I see intolerance or discrimination of any kind I am taken back to when I was a little girl in St. Louis, Missouri. My grandmother used to take me to a huge market called Souldard Market which for me was a place of wonderment. There were



aisles and aisles of fruits and vegetables. There were counters of wonderfully pink meats which conjured thoughts of delicious meals to come.

Laden with bags of all our goods, I would look longingly at the food counter filled with white shoppers enjoying a rest and a meal. I wondered why we could not sit there and eat. My grandmother explained we were not allowed to eat there because we were black and we had to go into our own neighborhood to eat. I never saw a sign in St. Louis that said blacks were not allowed, but I learned that I was not allowed in certain places. In the 1960s, activists held sit-ins at lunch counters that used such practices, and the civil rights movement began.

Today when I visit St. Louis, I can eat anywhere I want and the little girl in me is always amazed!



Four civil rights activists sit in seats designated for white people at the racially segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, NC, in 1960.

Although we have made progress, prejudice still exists. People are excluded because of nationality, race, religious choices, or simply being different. We must keep fighting ignorance and intolerance.

Ken remembers...

In 1956, when I was serving my country in the U.S. Air Force, stationed in San Francisco, the other airmen and I began a movement to end segregation at the Service Club.

The Service Club provided recreation for the men stationed on the base. Each Friday, the Service Club director would book a white band to play for the men. The girls who came there to dance with the airmen were white and not allowed to dance with the black airmen. My buddy and I organized demonstrations against this policy. We asked the NAACP for help. Finally, after several months of no satisfaction, we decided to take to the stage, we stopped the band from playing. My buddy made a beautiful speech about togetherness. We then placed chairs in the middle of the floor and began a sit-down demonstration.

The white airmen attacked us and violence broke out. The police came and most of the black airmen were arrested. The NAACP defended us and we were able to win the case. The Service Club was then integrated with white and black girls available as dancing partners. Since I was one of the organizers, the military found a way to punish me. They sent me far away to Alaska



Christmas dance at a Negro Service Club during World War II. Civil rights activists fought to have the military desegregated, which it was in 1948.

Firemen's song gave stricken girl hope

By MICHELE McPHEE
Daily News Staff Writer

Standing amid the sea of firefighters who plan to say goodbye this morning to Vernon Cherry, the Fire Department's official singer, will be a chubby 7-year-old girl from the Bronx.

Little Crystal Ann Perez believes the fireman helped save her life.

In August, Crystal was bedridden with leukemia and feeling awful when the burly mustached Cherry bounded into her room at Montefiore Medical Center and flashed his trademark cast-to-ear smile.

Cherry and two of his colleagues, Leon Smith and John Sorrentino, calling themselves the Fire Department's Orzo Cookie, had recorded a melody with the Songs of Love Foundation for terminally ill children in little Crystal's honor. Cherry wanted to play it for her.

It would be Cherry's last recorded song. Cherry and Smith were two of the six firefighters aboard the Brooklyn Heights Ladder Co. 118 truck that was photographed crossing the Brooklyn Bridge as it headed toward the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. All six men were lost in the disaster.

The eerie picture of the men driving to their deaths was featured on the front page of the Daily News.

Crystal's song was played at a memorial service for Ladder 118's fallen last week — after Sorrentino announced the little girl's leukemia was now in remission.

"This is Firefighter Cherry," the song began, resonating through Assumption Church in Brooklyn Heights over the steps of Cherry's wife of 31 years, Joanne. "Crystal Ann Perez, you make it all worthwhile. You brighten up our world with your beautiful smile."

The song also says, "Crystal draws like nobody else. She's got the style to impress. Take a look at her artwork. It's really the best."

Crystal said yesterday from her Castle Hill home: "I feel so sad Fireman Cherry is not here anymore. He sang me a song. He gave me a hug."

"She plays the song over and over and over again. Everyone in the family knows every single word of the song," said Crystal's mother, Lorraine Perez. "She's taken it to school with her. She carries it everywhere, listens to it constantly. We think it saved her."

Cherry had been the Fire Department's official singer since he became a firefighter in 1973. He also fronted a band called Starfire, which had gigs all over the city and specialized in Italian weddings.

"He was the best. He even learned how to sing songs in Italian," Sorrentino said of his friend. "The choir of angels up in heaven must have needed a new singer."

The memorial service for Cherry will be held at 11 a.m. today at the Antioch Baptist Church at Northern Blvd. and 103rd St. in Corona, Queens.

GIFT Firefighter Vernon Cherry, who died at Trade Center, recorded a song for ailing Crystal Ann Perez in August.

This Daily News article tells the story of how Vernon Cherry recorded a song for Crystal Ann Perez, who was sick with leukemia. Vernon created the song for the Songs of Love Foundation, which records music for terminally ill children. He also sang with the band, Starfire. This was the last song Vernon recorded before he died. "I feel so sad Fireman Cherry is not here anymore," she said. "He sang me a song. He gave me a hug."

to complete my final years in the Air Force. But I am proud of what we did. The actions we took are now noted in the Air Force Archives. We made history!

Since 9/11, people of the Muslim faith find themselves faced with much suspicion and mistrust. Like the black airmen of my experience, they find themselves in the position of having to defend themselves against stereotypes. They are forced to defend themselves without having done anything wrong. Black men in the 1940s and 50s faced harsh repercussions if they intermingled with white women. Their only crime was the color of their skin. This is much like people of the Muslim faith when they are trying to board a plane or just going about their normal lives. These law-abiding people are being punished for what fanatical criminals have done. This is just not acceptable!

Ken and Gloria Williams are members of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. They reside in the Bronx, New York. They have two daughters, Dena and Carissa, and an extended family member, Angel the cat.