

**Not Destined to Be Here**  
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**Rep. Louis Stokes**

I have oftentimes, sitting on the floor or standing in this well, pinched myself and asked if I was really here on the floor of the House of Representatives. I was not destined to be here.

I was born in Cleveland, in a family where a young woman and a young man fell in love and got married and had two children. Then, when I was 3 years of age (my brother was a year old) our father died.

My mother was left a young widow who had only an eighth-grade education. She had come from the South looking for a little better life than working in the cotton fields of Georgia. And here was a lady with only an eighth-grade education with two young boys to raise.

She did the best she could. She became a domestic worker. She went out in the suburban areas around Cleveland, the areas that I now represent in the United States Congress. Wealthy, white people's homes, where she scrubbed their floors, served their dinners, took care of their children, washed their clothes, cleaned their windows for \$8 a day and bus fare. And she found that she could not raise those two boys on \$8 a day and bus fare, so she also went on welfare.

She used to speak to both Carl and me and tell us to "grow up to be somebody." She used to tell us to "get an education." Her greatest dream was that those two boys would someday get a high school diploma. And she used to always say to us, "Get something in your head so you do not have to work with your hands like I have worked with my hands all of my life." And I never really understood what my mother was talking about until one night: She was very ill, and I heard her in the bedroom moaning with pain. I went into the room and I sat down by the bed. She was in such great pain that I reached out and grabbed both of her hands to try to give her some solace, some comfort. When I felt those hard hands, callused from scrubbing people's floors, I began to understand what she meant.

I went on to get my high school diploma and was drafted into service in World War II. My brother Carl dropped out of school at 16 and went out to Republic Steel to get a job sweeping floors. Shortly after I was drafted, he, too, was drafted into the service. When I came out of service, I realized that I needed an education. Fortunately, some people in Congress—whom I never saw, whom I never knew—had the vision to provide something called the GI Bill of Rights.

I went home one night and told my mother that I was going to go to college and she said, "Well, what would you do?" And I said, "I get \$95 a month and I'm going to go to Western Reserve University full time." She said, "You can't do that. You have to go to work." She said, "I've spent all these years just trying to get you and your brother a high school diploma. I need you now to help me."

She was right. And so I got a job. And I went to college nights. . . . [Later] I went to law school, worked a job all day, went to law school five nights a week, sat in law class from 6 to 10 every night and studied all weekend in the library.

Carl, when he came out [of the military] at 21, went back to East Tech High School . . . got his diploma and followed me into college. Much of the rest is history. He went on to become the first black Democrat to ever be elected to the Ohio legislature, then became the first black mayor of any major American city. He served two terms. He went on to New York; he became an Emmy-award-winning TV anchorman. He came back to Cleveland, went back in the practice of law, got elected to a judgeship, and then President Clinton appointed him as the United States ambassador to the Seychelles.

I spent 14 years practicing law as a criminal trial lawyer. I had the opportunity to participate in three cases in the United States Supreme Court and, as you have heard on the floor today, argued *Terry vs. Ohio*, which has become a landmark case in criminal constitutional law.

In this body, I was given some historic assignments: the privilege of chairing the Ethics Committee twice, where we handled the Abscam cases. We handled the sex and drug cases involving members of Con-

gress and the pages. The last case we handled was that of Geraldine Ferraro when she was running for the vice presidency of the United States. I was given the privilege of chairing the Assassinations Committee, investigating the assassinations of two of the greatest men, two of the greatest Americans who ever lived—President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King. I was given the privilege of being the first African American to chair the Intelligence Committee of the House. The only African-American that served on the Iran-Contra committee. I was a part of the team sent to Grenada to investigate the invasion by the United States of that tiny island.

And so I have had a great and wonderful and historic career here. This is why, on so many occasions, I have pinched myself to ask [how] this man—brought up in the housing projects of Cleveland, my mother scrubbing floors—winds up standing in the well of the United States Congress.

Today, as I say farewell to the House, having had the privilege of working on my last VA-HUD bill, I can only say to all of you that I am proud that I am an American. No matter what gripes we have, this is the greatest country in the world. The story I have recited to you today of the Stokes brothers could only happen in America. Only in America, Mr. Chairman. Only in America.