

LILLIE COTLON, 70,
TALKS WITH HER SON AND
BUSINESS PARTNER,
BURNELL COTLON, 47,
A GROCER.

Lillie Cotlon: You were a very curious child from day one, and you were always willing to jump off into things you had no business doing. *[Laughter.]* I used to wonder why you would always leave home earlier than everybody else. I didn't know where you were going. But from what I understand, you were buying candy from a candy factory down the street and selling it at school. So that told me that you were an entrepreneur-type person.

Burnell Cotlon: Well, I learned a lot from you about how to prepare myself for the future. You and Paw Paw—your father—taught me so much about saving money, and about

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life. That's why when Katrina hit, I knew we were going to make it.

Lillie: A couple of days after we left the city for the hurricane, we're sitting in a shelter watching the TV, and it seemed like every levee in the city had broken apart. To sit there and watch the water *pour* into the city, and knowing nothing can stop it—my heart just flipped. We lost everything in Katrina. Everything.

Burnell: The city was on lockdown then. They was talking about how the ground was contaminated in the Lower Ninth Ward and nobody could ever move back, but I snuck back in because I was determined to see my home. When I finally got down there, I saw my house. It had floated from the foundation into the street; only a telephone pole stopped it from actually collapsing. Seeing my house floating like that, that's when it really hit me. It was the first time I cried.

I lived in a FEMA trailer in New Orleans for almost three years, and I stayed in that little box saving up every dime until I was finally able to rebuild my house.

But as I drove around the Ninth Ward, I saw we didn't have any shops. You have to catch three buses just to get to a store—and the closest one is a Walmart in the next city. I was taught if there's a problem, there's always an answer; somebody got to make a move.

Lillie: After Katrina you had been working in management at Burger King, at McDonald's, Family Dollar. I used to bring

your lunch to you, and this one particular day when I saw you, I said, "Son, let me tell you something. I think you're in the wrong business. I suggest you sit down and think about what your next step in life is gonna be." I say, "Maybe it's some type of business of your own."

Burnell: You told me to get back to the entrepreneurial spirit that was already inside of me. And I'm glad I listened. I decided to open up a grocery store.

I remember when I first bought the building. It used to be a barbershop, but at the time it was full of trash. Everybody thought that I was crazy. I kept hearing, you know, "It's gonna take too much money. Nobody's gonna support you." It was a lot of negativity. But I didn't see it like that. I saw an opportunity.

Lillie: I remember when I peeked in the door before you started working, there was nails and debris on the floor that you had to crawl over. I said, "Oh, Lord, how can he make anything out of this?" The roof was badly damaged, too, and you were tearing it down—just you and your friend Walter. You was scaring the daylight out of me. I used to pray for you all the time: "Please, God, take care of these guys up here on this roof!" [*Laughter.*] But you got it done.

Burnell: Those eight-hour days easily start turning to fourteen-, fifteen-hour days, trying to finish. You know, it was real, real hard. But what motivated me the most was working

up there and seeing the people with their groceries, coming from that Walmart. I'd see them get off the bus with all of those bags, and they would stop in the middle of the street just to relax, and then pick the bags back up and keep on going. And so we kept on going, too. Seeing that made me work harder.

Lillie: At the grand opening, the whole city hall was there. And I served the very first sno-ball.

Burnell: I will never forget that day. The first customer was an elderly lady. And I remember she cried because she said she never thought the Lower Ninth Ward was coming back.

Seeing all the kids and everyone out there, that's when it hit me that this dream I had of turning that shell of a building into a store was for real—and it really meant something.

Lillie: The Lower Ninth Ward was devastated. I mean, worse than any part of the entire city. But you had vision enough to see that this is a place that can be developed—you saw something that we didn't.

Burnell: It feels good, knowing that we made a difference in the community. After Katrina, we all was in the same boat. Everybody lost. But look at us today. We have the first grocery store in the Lower Ninth Ward—the first and *only* grocery store. And I'ma keep on going.

Just seeing so many people walk back and forth to the store, it's a joy—let alone drive to the store. I looked in the rear view

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mirror when we was leaving out today and saw two cars driving up. If they have a car, that means they *choose* to come here. That means we're doing something right.

All the headaches—all those hours rebuilding, hanging off the roof—was worth it for the look on my customers' faces when they walk through the door. And if it takes me do it by



myself, I'ma put one business at a time back into the Lower Ninth Ward. 'Cause it's home.

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