Ollie Beene’s Life Journey

“An American dream exists for everyone, but it is up to that person to push and achieve it on their own.” Ollie Beene, a strong brave man who went through many struggles to get to where he is today; a man full of happiness. With these struggles pulling him in different directions, he kept his head held high and continued to sway back and forth with the amazing flow of what he calls, life.

Growing up in a small town in Milwaukee, as a young boy, Ollie’s life mainly consisted of working on a farm for just a couple of dollars. It was Monday morning when a smile grew on his face while he felt sweat dripping down his brown skin, as the sun beamed on his head while he spent time planting, picking, and raising cotton. He patted himself on the back because he knew he was working hard. The only time Ollie did not have to work as hard was when it would start to rain. A look of happiness would rapidly appear on his family’s face because when the rain grew heavier, puddles and puddles would surround the field, so it would be too wet to work for the day. While the rain began to pour down, Ollie and his family would get on their two knees and sing, “Rain rain rain. Rain more, rain heavy”. When the rain would clear up, everyone returned back to their daily routine. Working in the field was a way to make a living for himself and his family. They were able to make enough money to support each other. Although he came from a low class family, he never went a day without food. Whenever he was craving a taste, he always could rely on his long field filled with yellow corn and tasty greens. Him and his family also raised hogs and cured the meat which lasted all year long, so Ollie rarely had a reason to starve. Blisters began to grow rapidly on the hands of Ollie every day and night as he milked cows so that him and his family would have something to drink the next morning. All the hard work that Ollie was so determined to accomplish, distracted him from what was really important, his education.

Unlike most children, Ollie did not have an opportunity to receive a good education, due to the fact that he was only able to attend school 2-3 days a week. The remaining days of the week, Ollie dedicated his time to farm work. He looks back on his life and wishes that he could have learned a lot more and possibly have attended college. Unable to complete 8th grade, Ollie continued to take in as much information as possible. Ollie was more than excited to attend his math class; as he stared at his teacher while she taught him about fractions, time seem to flash before his eyes. Just as soon as class started, it soon ended, forcing Ollie to return to the field to work.

As Ollie grew older and began to become wiser, he realized he did not want to spend the rest of his life in pain from working on a farm. In result, he eagerly joined the Army. His first option was to join the Navy, but when they inducted him, he was automatically sent to the army where he began his training. During his training, the second World War had erupted. He had spent five long years battling for his country. He was able to travel to England, France and Germany while fighting in World War II. A vivid moment he could never forget was the fear of dying as the fire of the German guns burst into the sky. But for Ollie, all of this fear was put aside. He did everything he could to remain not only a calm, but a strong soldier as well. He was able to encourage those around him to push through the hard times despite everything they have gone through. One death, two deaths, three deaths and many more to come, he was eventually numb to the idea that death was just the cost of war. He realized that it was important to put his emotions behind him and remain a courageous role model for the rest of the soldiers. As hard as it was for him to step up and be a brave soldier and deal with the many tragedies that were occurring, he had to face the fact that this is how it was and how it always would be.

When Ollie disjoined the army, he felt as if he was sitting on top of the world because he now had what he always wanted, free time. He was able to take a break from the world and relax for a few months. In these few months, Ollie thought hard about his transition into civilian life again. What was he to do now that the war was over?

Many people in the world have dreams, dreams as big as going to the moon or becoming a millionaire. But Ollie? His dreams were less complicated. All he wanted was just one job to provide for himself, this was his one and only American Dream. After he got out of the Army, he had his free time, but he would think to himself, “I need a job”. He was happy to be free but was he really free? He had money that he received from the Army, but it wasn’t enough. Also, his race had an effect on his ability to exceed in life. When asked what race he was, Ollie described himself as, “Some say colored, some say Negro and some say Black. Im all three of em”. With his head down and tears running down his cheeks, Ollie grew angry because he strongly felt, with all his heart, that this was the exact reason why it was so hard for him to get a job. Discriminated each and every day was a challenge he had to face. He still clearly remembers the day where he went into town to receive a flu shot where he saw whites at the front of the line but all of the blacks, including him, were sent to the back of the line. This hit him hard because he knew that he had a disadvantage because of his race. He never knew life could be this unfair.

Through all of his difficult times, Ollie finally found peace within himself. He was able to come home and surprisingly, lift his arms into the sky to thank God for all he has done because he was now blessed with the opportunity to get his first job, washing dishes. Little did he know that he would later be promoted to a cook. Overwhelmed by all of the emotions. Going to the army was a gateway for opportunity and a step to achieving his American Dream. He achieved his dream, but it took a very long time. This wasn't anything new to him because he understood that Americans will never be treated equally simply because everything depended on how much money you had, your race, and where you came from. Not having as much money, Ollie would always see people with more than him as the type who could achieve big dreams, and people with less, would struggle. By saying this, he was specifically talking about those of color. “If everyone was equal, so many innocent young black males wouldn't get killed. Racism is still alive and always will be”, said Ollie as he gave a look that was slightly discouraging.

While there were many rough moments in Ollie’s life, one memory will forever be engraved in his heart. Looking back on all he has been through, he had a flashback to a special day, the day he was born. His mother told him that as she was carrying his precious body in her stomach, the doctor told her that Ollie wouldn’t make it. Despite all of the negative outcomes that could have happened, his mother overlooked them and birthed him anyway, and here he is today, a strong ninety one year old man. This was only one of the few times someone doubted him. There were times where he doubted himself as well, patiently waiting to escape from his old life. In the end, he proved not only others wrong but himself also. Yes, he accomplished his main dream of getting a job, but he also achieved an even more beautiful dream. Ollie is now enjoying life more than ever. He is having a fantastic time because he is still alive and feels that he has no reason to complain. Ninety-one years old, Ollie feels blessed with the opportunity to be able to move around and walk on both feet. He is still able to communicate, love and appreciate his family. He is proud to have children and even grandchildren and is thankful for the opportunity to have a chance at life. This was his definition of the perfect American Dream. It was what he spent his whole life waiting to achieve, and that is exactly what he did.

It is typical to see that unlike today, the American Dream in the 50’s had a different meaning. For Ollie especially, it was harder to achieve his American Dream because he was still tackling issues as big as racial discrimination. “Children in 1950’s had different lives compared to young people today. Most left school much earlier, with many starting work at the age of fourteen and fewer people had the chance to go onto further education” (mylearning.org). It is disappointing to come to the realization that not everyone in this decade had the opportunity to obtain a decent education. Whites usually were found to have a better educational system than African Americans. Many people during this time wished they would have been able to go to school and learn something but most of their spare time was spent working. Housework was not as easy as it seems for a family who comes home to dinner ready on the table with everything nice and clean. The reality was that during this time, housework was way more difficult. According to (mylearning.org), “People did their washing by hand, instead of a machine, and without fridge-freezers, food had to be bought daily. It was less common for women to work and many took on the childcare and housework, while their husbands were working”. The amount of work you had to do for one “simple” house duty, was so much more difficult than it seemed to be.

If we look deeper into the situation, patterns start to appear. It wasn't just black men who had hard lives, but a majority of them were put in very difficult situations, for example their “education system”(123helpme.org). Education was very meaningful to a lot of children. But, the schools for African American children were usually extremely poor and didn't provide them with the necessary learning they truly needed.(123helpme.org). It is disappointing that it was like this, but segregation issues made it harder for some people to achieve their American Dream. Blacks were not allowed to marry, use the same bathroom, or even be near a white person. The average African American male wasn't given as many job opportunities as others. The ones that were given to them were jobs that didn't make very much money. But Whites had various amounts of job opportunities to chose from after WWII. On the other hand, middle class families had many advantages available for themselves. After high school, many middle class men and women had a variety of job opportunities to chose from and their own personal version of the American Dream which was the dream of a big house with a white picket fence, a hardworking husband and perhaps two children that are able to receive a good education. Some people just wanted simple dreams, a house and enough income to make a living. “The 1950’s was also an era of great conflict. For example, the nascent civil rights movement”([http://www.history.com/topics](http://www.history.com/topics/19)).

During this period of time, segregation was definitely a huge issue. It is important to understand that segregation did not begin in this decade, it is an issue that has always been around. Although segregation took a toll on this decade, the 50’s was when more opportunities were offered to the people, but not for everyone.

In the 1950’s, a light sparked in the minds of a group of African Americans. “Africans had been fighting against racial discrimination for centuries; however, the struggle against racism and segregation entered the mainstream of American life” ([http](http://www.history.com/topics/1950s)history). They wanted a change and the motivation to help those who were oppressed in their struggle to receive justice and human dignity. A group of African Americans joined together and finally decided that enough was enough and were leaders in the start of the Civil Rights Movement, which continued until the next decade. During this decade, not only were people searching for equality, but many Americans were eager to start a family because the idea of a life full of peace and prosperity was stuck deep in their minds. This time was known as the “Baby Boom”. During the Baby Boom, “rates of unemployment and inflation were low, and wages were high. Middle class people had more more money to spend than ever and because the variety and availability of consumer goods expanded along with the economy, they also had more things to buy” (history.com). Ollie Beene shared in that same experience. As a participant in the Baby Boom era, Ollie also felt the pressure to start a family of his own. Once he started a family, he knew he had to step up to the plate and be a man, which meant becoming independent. He now had to do everything he could to provide for his loved ones even though money was tight.

Along with having to be an independent person, Ollie knew that there would be many factors that can differ his path from the mainstream American Dream version. Take for example, gender. Mary Henderson, a white woman who after World War II, had many job opportunities open for her such as a lawyer or a doctor. This shows that life was harder on a man's part, especially an African American man. The men were the ones who were expected to work outside of the house and provide for the family, while a majority of the women did housework. So Ollie definitely had a hard life not only as an African American, but also as an African American man. But he pushed through his struggles and got what he always wanted from life. It took a while, but he was still able to make it happen. He looks at how far he’s come, and with a huge smile on his face, can say that he has lived a life with absolutely no regrets.

There are many situations that can distract oneself from achieving their American Dream. Both Ollie and Mary Henderson- despite their differences, had many similarities that allowed them to achieve their American Dream. Both of their dreams had a specific level of simplicity. In 2015, most people have dreams of being wealthy, having a large house, kids, and attending college, but it was way different for people during the 1950’s. The two of them, Ollie and Mary, wanted one job and wanted a family of their own. World War II had a negative and major effect on Ollie and Mary. Although World War II scared them with nightmares, on a positive note, the war was able to teach them to never settle for less. Finding a job was their main dream and they both were able to pursue it.

The American Dream in the 1950’s was simple, but so precious at the same time. However, many opportunities that were offered, depended on your race and wherever you come from. Anyone can achieve their American Dream, whether it's simple or complex, but the question is, how hard are you willing to work for it? With the perseverance and dedication, Ollie believes that anyone can achieve their own American Dream.