

Charlie Womack, the guitarist at the XL Center

A lone figure sits just beyond the main entrance of the XL Center arena in Hartford. Though the heat inside is set on the optimally comfortable level mere yards away, he braves the frigid outdoor January temperatures to play his guitar and sing. Thousands of college students and Connecticut residents entering the arena for UConn basketball games recognize his face and voice instantly. Yet somehow, incredibly, almost nobody knows this man's name.



By Jesse Rifkin
Weekly Columnist

His name is Charlie Womack. And his story – with its highs, lows, and regrets – provides a lesson to us all about the importance of making wise long-term decisions in life.

“I was born and raised in M e K e n z i e ,

Alabama,” said Womack, age 72.

The town boasted 530 residents and a \$10,359 median per capita income as of last year. Womack, an African-American, grew up in a state which illegalized interracial marriage until 2000. What was it like coming of age during such a discriminatory location and era, given his skin color?

“You know what it was like,” he answers bitterly. “You’ve read the history books.”

After spending years picking cotton in the oppressive Southern heat, Womack dropped out of high school at age 17. He moved around between several different states, including Florida and New York, primarily working construction jobs to support himself. With no degree and meager wages, he turned instead to a different business offer-

ing more lucrative results in the immediate short-term.

“I sold all kinds of drugs,” he said, dealing for many years in all manner of illegal narcotics.

With the benefit of hindsight, he now strongly denounces his former profession and urges today’s youth not to involve themselves with that lifestyle.

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Like most lives of crime, Womack could only keep up the act for so long. Law enforcement eventually caught and arrested him for the possession and selling of cocaine, a felony for which he received and served an 18-month jail sentence. During that time, he quit his cigarette addiction cold turkey and made a difficult introspective examination of his choices. Upon release he vowed to turn his life around. Unfortunately, his age and lack of high school diploma were difficult barriers to overcome.

So, Womack fell back on his first love: music. Since childhood he had sung as a member of gospel choirs in church and slowly taught himself how to play guitar with no lessons or help. Once out of prison, he bought himself a Gibson Les Paul electric guitar, a zip-up instrument case, an amplifier, a microphone and a stool. Now he sits every day and every night outside the XL Center, strumming his guitar and singing to such uplifting classics as “What a Wonderful

World” by Louis Armstrong, “Stand By Me” by Ben E. King and “I Got a Woman” by Ray Charles.

Still, Womack’s eyes take in the cold dark reality of the city streets. Teenagers are quitting high school, selling drugs and starting down the same dangerous path he began walking down such a very long time ago.

“People don’t have jobs,” he said. “And there is too much killing going on. It’s rough out there.”

Womack’s tale holds particular significance for college students. The economic value and societal usefulness of higher education is often contested nowadays by critics and scathing articles. But take it from the lonely musician on the street corner – with no wife or children and only his guitar to keep him company. The only problem is, his education and life experience make changing careers an impossibility. You can see in his eyes that he loves what he does. But after his admirers exit the basketball game for the parking garage while perhaps throwing a one dollar bill into his jar, the streets get quiet... and you can also see that at the end of the day, he would rather be doing something else.

At the same time, his story validates the never-ending value of optimism. Every single one of us experiences sorrow and shame. We do not, however, need to psychologically succumb to allowing our past to subsume our present. “The song is right,” Womack reflects. “What a wonderful world.” Instead of sulking in remorse and sadness, Womack consciously decided to make people smile for a living. And for that occupation, there is no degree required.

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