

Interview of Mr. Warren Kirkland Jan 23 Newsletter

How long have you lived in the Lake Belleview neighborhood, Warren?

I was born in Morton Plant Hospital in 1958. I actually lived in North Greenwood when I was a child, in the Greenwood Apartments. It was pretty dangerous there. After my grandma got a house here in Lake Belleview, my mom moved us here when I was 10-years-old.

What was it like in Lake Belleview when you were younger?

It was inspiring here. It was mostly an African American community. I was exposed to so many Black men who owned businesses. Mr. Frank Golden owned a roofing company. Mr. Herbert had a plumbing company. Mr. Dash had a drywall company. Mr. Spencer did window installation. Mr. Emerson had a lawn service.

It was so important and inspiring to me to see Black men who owned businesses. If we don't see it, we don't believe it. And even if we don't see it, we still need to believe in it. These Black leaders were determined to help their own. They got their own workers, mostly Black men. I was taught charity begins at home. Those men, too, had to go to White city leaders to get the roads paved, to get the infrastructure that our community needed. They were leaders. I looked up to them.

You know it's interesting that when I was growing up we used to call our community Bellaire. We wanted to identify with something we thought was good. That's just human nature; we wanted the same opportunities they had.

Can you tell me about your family?

My mom, Jeannette Irene Kirkland, and my dad, John Wesley Kirkland had seven children. I'm the sixth out of seven – two brothers and four sisters. I'm the youngest boy.

I have two sons, Alex (42) and Dereck (36) and two daughters, Wy'anna (16) and Wy'asia (14).

What was your career path?

My first job was with the CETA program, from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973. I was about 15 or 16 and in the summer worked mostly at Belmont Park. We had the “Keep it Clean” program, and we led neighborhood kids in crafts and sports and other recreational activities. I graduated from Clearwater High School in 1977 and went to St. Pete Jr. College for a year and a half. College wasn’t really for me, so I enlisted in the Army. I became a petroleum supply specialist on a “regular term” and served for three years. I went in at 19, and I was out at 21.

I came back to Clearwater and served the remaining 3 years of active service in the National Guard: Eleven Bravo. After I left the Army, I started working at Pioneer Savings Bank off East Bay. I was working at their main branch as a courier and mail clerk. Then life changed.

I developed substance abuse challenges and was in and out of prison from 1987-2002. I got caught in that revolving door. But I’m proud to say things got better. The last time I got out I got a job at Magic Tilt. They, too were off East Bay. They manufactured boat trailers. I was an assembler and then a supervisor of 10 employees. I worked there for five years, until about 2007 when the recession hit and they closed down my department.

Next, I started working for my dad who owned a lawn care business. I really got to know the business and thought, “OK, I can be a businessman.” So I got a lawnmower and started walking around my community, the Lake Belleview community, with my lawnmower and started to mow lawns and create a list of customers. Then I bought a vehicle and a trailer. I built my business to over 100 customers! But I just wore myself out. I really did damage to my hip. I learned a valuable lesson: you can’t do it all by yourself.

Now, I’m working on my physical therapy to get back to 100% after two hip replacements in 2020 and 2021. I’m currently working with a friend helping him with his lawn service, but I’m gentler on my body, now.

Warren, you were recognized last fall as the Lake Belleview Neighborhood Volunteer of the Year. It was primarily because you are committed to

beautifying your community and being a positive role model. Can you share what you do to make a difference in Lake Belleview?

Well, for so many years now I've focused on improving our environment. Mostly this was in lawn care, cutting lawns, trimming trees, edging, shaping bushes, all that kind of thing. It was making someone's property look nice. After I had my hip surgeries, walking was a big part of my therapy. And one morning I woke up and God spoke to me, and He said, "Instead of just walking, I want you to start picking up paper." And I did. And I know that this is bigger than me. The more I get out and pick up trash, the more people see me doing this, the more they join in. They see bigger and better things happening in our neighborhood. I see it! It makes a difference. It's important. You know, we all have a purpose, and we can all make a difference. You know, the greatest thing is action. That's what we're here for. Just be a do-er.

What do you like most about Clearwater? When I was young, I used to go down Cleveland St. There was a sign there: "Welcome to Sparkling Downtown Clearwater" that's what I want our city to be. Sparkling. I think that is one of the things that draws tourists here. It's beautiful at the beach. We need that beauty throughout our city.

Any suggestions on how Clearwater can be a better city? We need to come together. There's one view in life focused on divide and conquer. But we've got to come together to make a difference. Everyone has to bring their ideas and work to come together. It's like the body has many members or parts, but we're all part of the same body or the same city. We have to work together to stay healthy and to look good. That's it – right there.

What's your favorite restaurant? Texas Roadhouse. I like the steak and baked sweet potatoes. And they have the best rolls.

Favorite sports team? Tampa Bucs -

What do you like to do in your free time? I like to spend time with my girls and watch football.

What advice would you give young people today?

Be awakened to the life you are given. Work hard to better yourself and where you are at. I would tell them I love them. You need to tell people who matter that they matter. Everyone has a purpose and can make a difference. That's it!

Favorite quote you live by? In darkness there is light. There's nothing new under the sun. If we don't let things consume us – we can see that the struggle is the darkness, but We are the LIGHT!

Anything else you'd like to share?

I'm just trying to do the good that I was led to do. Share your life lessons; the life we live is a testimony. Really that's what we all should be doing. We get caught up in the ruckus of life. I'm just thankful that I'm allowed and chosen to do this work. I just want to stay humble and do what I'm allowed to do and watch out for other people. I want other people to be happy in life, too. I would love it if we all were inspired. And finally, you're not doomed from a stumble – you can move on – but you want to avoid those stumbles. I believe everyone needs to know that. It's going to be shown that life goes on. I'm blessed to recover from my stumbles and I'm here to help others.