

Dedication

This book is dedicated first and foremost to God, the Author and Finisher of my faith — the One who kept me when I could not keep myself. Every page, every chapter, and every testimony is a reflection of His grace, mercy, and power.

To my wife, Sherrie, my anchor, my partner in purpose, and the love of my life — thank you for standing beside me through every storm and every victory. Your strength, faith, and unwavering support have been the heartbeat of this journey.

To my children — Mario Jr, Marion, Jacob, Caleb, Mariah, RayLin, and Faith; Granddaughters, Adeya and Aaonnalaya; — you are my greatest legacy. Each of you carries a piece of my heart and a part of my purpose. I pray that you will always walk in faith, live in excellence, and stand tall in everything you do.

To my love sons, A.J. and Justin it has been such a blessing to be your Pops.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

To the memory of my brothers, Antonio and Deron — your lives continue to inspire me. Though you are no longer here in body, your spirit lives on in every sermon I preach, every business I build, and every soul I reach.

To my parents, Charles and Linda:

Mom and Dad, we were born blessed to be brought up in a God-fearing home. The first place you took all of us was to church, laying the foundation of faith in our lives. Never question yourselves—in our eyes, you never made a mistake. You raised three wonderful boys who grew into accomplished men. It was your dream that we see the world, and you made it happen for all of us. We traveled the country and parts of the world, creating memories that will last a lifetime. You instilled in us a strong work ethic, teaching us the value of hard work and perseverance. There is nothing we would change about our journey. Everything we watched you go through and overcome helped us stand tall and believe in our own strength.

To my paternal Grandma Mary and my maternal Grandma Emma:

You were the foundation of our family, and I learned so much from you both. I was truly blessed to have two God-fearing, praying grandmothers. You cared for foster children, raised large families of your own, and managed to keep everything together with grace and love. Your strength, compassion, faith, and legacy live on in me, in our families, and will be carried on throughout generations.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

To my Paternal Grandfather Miller and Maternal Grandfather Marshall:

You were not perfect, but you were instrumental in shaping the man I am today. Grandpa Marshall, your financial support for the ministry and your surrender to Christ at my church were a testament to your faith. You would often encourage me, saying, "Preach, Mario, I am doing the best I can." You were so proud when I laid Grandma Emma to rest and delivered the sermon, even requesting that I preach at your own funeral—a request I was honored to fulfill. Both of you taught me the value of hard work through farming and fishing, and even how to hold my liquor, "lol," and I deeply admired you. Your lessons and love continue to guide me every day.

And to every survivor, dreamer, and believer who has ever faced adversity —

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

PREFACE

Every story begins somewhere, but not every beginning is recognized for what it truly is. Mine started in the quiet corners of Milwaukee, where dreams were often bigger than the means to reach them. Yet within those limits, there was something powerful — hope. It lived in the way my parents worked tirelessly, in the laughter of my brothers, Antonio and Charles, and in the belief that no matter how far we had to go, we would go there together.

Looking back now, I realize that the lessons of those early years were never about success or recognition. They were about faith, humility, and the courage to keep moving forward even when the path wasn't clear. Those lessons became the compass that guided me through life's storms and triumphs alike.

What follows is not just a recollection of events — it's a journey through the moments that shaped me, the people who left their mark, and the faith that never let me go. It's about finding meaning in the ordinary and strength in the unseen.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

Introduction — Standing T.A.L.L.

There comes a point in every person's life when standing tall isn't an option — it's a necessity. I've learned that faith doesn't exempt you from storms; it equips you to stand through them. My story is proof that no matter how hard life hits, you can rise again, stronger and wiser than before.

I didn't always know what it meant to stand tall. I just knew how to survive. I survived the streets of Milwaukee, survived twelve bullets, survived heartbreak, failure, and loss. But survival alone wasn't enough — God was calling me to stand. To stand in faith. To stand in purpose. To stand in leadership.

Over the years, I discovered that standing tall isn't about posture — it's about perspective. It's about learning to see purpose in pain and destiny in disappointment. That revelation gave birth to the message that defines my life and ministry: T.A.L.L. — Through All Life's Lessons.

Through All Life's Lessons

Every experience — every victory, every failure, every tear, every triumph — has been a lesson from God. The acronym T.A.L.L. became my personal reminder that everything I've been through was preparing me for what I was called to do.

| Letter | Meaning | Life Application |

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| T | Through | You can't skip the process. You have to go through it — the pain, the pressure, the preparation — to reach purpose. |

| A | All | God uses all things — even the broken pieces — to build something beautiful. Nothing in your life is wasted. |

| L | Life's | Life will test your faith and expose your foundation. What you build on determines how you stand when the storm hits. |

| L | Lessons | Every lesson learned in the valley becomes the wisdom you carry to the mountain. Growth is the reward for endurance. |

The Journey of a Lifetime

When I look back, I see that every bullet, every betrayal, every business challenge, and every blessing was a classroom. God was teaching me how to lead, how to love, and how to live.

- Through the pain, I found purpose.
- Through the loss, I found leadership.
- Through the lessons, I found life.

Standing T.A.L.L. is about embracing the totality of your story — the good, the bad, and the redeemed. It's about realizing that your scars are not signs of defeat but symbols of survival.

Why This Book Exists

This book isn't written for the perfect. It's written for the persevering. For the one who's been knocked down but refuses to stay down. For the one who's been overlooked, underestimated, or misunderstood — yet still believes there's more.

My prayer is that as you turn these pages, you'll see yourself in my story. You'll find the courage to confront your past, the strength to endure your present, and the faith to believe in your future.

Because when you learn to stand T.A.L.L. — Through All Life's Lessons — you'll realize that every setback was setting you up for a comeback.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

Family has always been the foundation of my life — the source of my strength, my lessons, and my purpose. From the very beginning, I was surrounded by love, discipline, and a deep sense of belonging. Our home was never quiet; it was alive with laughter, conversation, and the steady rhythm of hard work. My parents built that rhythm, and it carried through every part of who we became.

I still remember my Fifth birthday party on 35th and Highland in Milwaukee. Mickey Mouse was there, and my whole family — everyone who mattered — surrounded me. Life felt good, simple. I was sheltered from the dangers of the city. My parents kept me close, visiting their business and staying active in church. My father was an Elder, my mother a Missionary. But there was also LaFondra — my nanny — like a second mother to me. She filled my childhood with adventures, Chuck E. Cheese visits, and joy. Her recent passing left a hole in my heart, but her impact remains deeply rooted in my life.

As a child, I didn't see the cracks forming. I didn't realize Milwaukee could be dangerous until I saw my first bullet wound on a stranger, just down the street, when I was five. And by the time my parents started Divine Temple in 1994, something awakened in me. That was when I discovered my gift for the Word — winning the church competition by reciting all 66 books of the Bible. That victory made my parents proud, and it planted a seed of confidence that would grow for years to come.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

My brothers, Antonio and Charles, were my first friends and lifelong teachers. We learned together, worked together, and dreamed together. We didn't have much, but we had each other — and that was more than enough. Antonio had a spark that could light up a room and a musical genius that amazed everyone. Charles carried a calm wisdom beyond his years. Each of us had our own path, but we shared a bond that time and distance could never break.

But there were shadows too. When my brother Charles Duran went to prison for twelve years, it was a shock to us all. I felt guilty, wondering if I could have done more. My younger brother was just a child, and suddenly we saw how people treated us differently — as if my brother's mistakes defined our family. But we stood together, even as I wrestled with my own identity, torn between the pull of the streets and the foundation of faith my parents had laid.

By fifteen, I had opened Mario Dickens Creations in my mother's home, guided by my Aunt Jean and my mother's encouragement. While other kids played sports, I was printing obituaries and invitations — balancing business dreams with the lure of the streets.

Then, in 2002, everything changed. I got married, had a son, and was running the business, but I wasn't holding strong to my values. On October 23rd, during a home invasion robbery, I was shot twelve times and left for dead in my hallway. Shame, fear, and doubt flooded in. What would people say about my father, the Bishop, and my mother, the Elect Lady of the church? But even in

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

that moment of darkness, something new was being born.

Less than six months later, I opened my first office on 76th and Hampton, with a 48-foot billboard proclaiming Mario Dickens Creations. I accepted my call to ministry. It was a rebirth — a second chance. I came out victorious.

And this is where my story begins!



Foreword

By Pastor James Bufford Jr.

“For we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” — Romans 8:28

This verse has carried me through some of the most defining moments of my life. In 2023, my father passed away. That year tested every part of me. I was dealing with new health challenges, marriage struggles, and trying to make sense of business and personal transitions that seemed to hit all at once. Yet, nothing compared to the loss of my father.

I remember standing at his funeral, having just finished eulogizing him. It was one of the greatest honors of my life to speak well of a man who had shaped me in so many ways. As the funeral came to a close, the director placed his hand on my shoulder and said to the congregation, “This is a good son.” In that moment, something in me both broke and stood still.

I thought about everything my father had been to me — his support, his laughter, his mentoring, and the way he

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

could challenge me with both love and truth. I remembered his sermons, his wisdom, and the times he laughed at my mistakes just to help me grow. That was the moment I realized it was truly over. I had laid my father to rest, but inside I felt lost.

Since 2016, I had been his caregiver, so I knew the day would come. Still, nothing prepared me for that silence. Afterward, every day became a new lesson in functioning without closure. Some days I laughed. Some days I cried. Some days I did both. Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears because I can still feel the weight of his presence in my life. He was not just my father; he was my covering. He was the person I knew would be there, no matter what.

Through that season, I began to learn what it truly means to stand. Not in my own strength, but in God's. Standing is not about being unshaken. It is about finding peace in the middle of what you do not understand. It is about trusting that even in heartbreak, God is still working all things together for good.

That is why Standing T.A.L.L. (Through All Life's Lessons) by Dr. Mario Dickens speaks so deeply to me. This book captures the very essence of what I had to live through — learning how to keep standing when life shifts beneath your feet. It reminds us that even when life gives us lessons we never asked for, those lessons carry wisdom and strength that will carry us forward.

So as you read this book, take it personally. Let it reach the places in you that have been through loss, pressure,

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

or uncertainty. Let it remind you that no matter what you have faced, you can still stand. You can still grow. You can still rise.

Because in the end, through all life's lessons, God proves that we are never standing alone.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

Chapter One:

Early Childhood and Family Roots

The story of who I am begins long before I took my first breath. It began with the people who carried faith, resilience, and love through generations — my grandparents, my parents, and the community that surrounded us. I was born into a family that believed in hard work, prayer, and the power of standing together even when life tried to pull us apart.

A Birth Marked by Prayer and Promise

My story begins with a miracle. Before I was born, doctors told my mother she would not be able to have any more children. She had already given birth to my older brother, Charles Deron, twelve years earlier, and though she longed for a daughter, she had accepted what the doctors said. But God had other plans.

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

My mother often tells the story of how Pastor Deshazer prophesied to her, in front of Bishop P.J. Henderson, that she would have a baby girl. Like Sarah in the Bible, she initially rejected the prophecy because it had been 12 long years with no results, not knowing that she was already pregnant at the time.

When the day finally came, there were medical complications, and I could not be delivered. My mom had to go to a different hospital during hard labor. Her Bishop, M.J. Ellis, heard of the complications and called to pray with her. He shared that the Lord had shown him she would deliver, but he saw a boy and that she would take him to the church and place him in his hands. She accepted the part about delivering safely, but was still standing on her belief that I would be a girl.

My birth was not easy. I was breech, and my mother had to undergo a C-section to bring me safely into the world. My father witnessed my birth and described it as nothing short of a miracle. When I was born, I was in a breech position, upside down, with my hands together as if I were praying. It became a story my father would share with pride—a sign, they said, that I came into the world already in conversation with God.

But even that, my mother would say, was part of the miracle. Against every medical prediction, both I and my younger brother—born eight years later—became living proof that faith can override fear and that God's promises never return void.

From the very beginning, my life was marked by prayer, persistence, and divine purpose.

The Foundation of Family

My grandmothers, Mary and Emma, were the hearts of our family. They were women of strength who carried the weight of generations on their shoulders. They raised children, cared for others' children, and still found time to pray, cook, and nurture everyone who crossed their paths. Their homes were safe havens — places where you could always find a warm meal, a listening ear, and a reminder that love was stronger than struggle.

My grandfathers, Marshall and Miller, were men of few words but deep lessons. They taught me that a man's worth isn't measured by what he owns but by what he builds — in his home, his work, and his character. They worked the land, fished the rivers, and taught their sons and grandsons to take pride in honest labor. Their lessons weren't written down, but they were etched into our family's DNA.

Those early generations didn't have much, but they had faith. And that faith became the cornerstone of everything that followed.

Growing Up in Milwaukee

I was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city of contradictions — full of culture and community but also marked by struggle and survival. My childhood home on

Standing T.A.L.L. Through All Life's Lessons

35th and Highland was alive with energy. My parents, Charles and Linda, were not only devoted to their faith and family but also deeply ambitious professionals.

My father was a visionary entrepreneur who built one of the ten largest Black-owned businesses in Milwaukee. His company stood as a symbol of excellence and determination in a time when opportunities for Black business owners were limited. He was a man of discipline and faith, serving as an elder in the church while leading a thriving enterprise that inspired others in our community to dream bigger.

My mother was equally remarkable — a banker by profession and a woman of grace, intellect, and drive. She balanced her career with her calling as a missionary, showing me that success and service could coexist. Together, my parents were a powerhouse — career-driven, entrepreneurial, and unwavering in their belief that faith and hard work could open any door.

Their example shaped everything I would later become. Watching them manage business meetings during the week and lead worship on Sundays taught me that leadership wasn't just about profit — it was about purpose.

Our home was filled with love, laughter, and the constant hum of gospel music. Sundays were sacred. We dressed in our best clothes, piled into the car, and headed to church together. It wasn't just a routine — it was our rhythm, our reminder that no matter what the world outside looked like, God was still in control.

But even in that warmth, I began to notice the world beyond our doorstep. Milwaukee was changing. The laughter of children on the block was sometimes interrupted by sirens, and the innocence of youth was often tested by the reality of the streets. Still, my parents did everything they could to shield me from it — keeping me close, keeping me grounded, and keeping me focused on something greater.

The Influence of My Brothers

My brothers, Antonio “Shang” and Charles Deron, were the bookends of my life — one twelve years older, the other eight years younger. We were born far apart, but that distance never weakened our connection. We didn't share the same clothes or eat from the same plate, but we shared something deeper — love, respect, and an unbreakable bond that time could never touch.

Each of us carried a unique gift. Shang was the musician — he could play almost any instrument he touched, and his rhythm seemed to come from somewhere divine. His talent filled our home with sound and soul. Deron was the genius — quiet at times but never ordinary. His mind worked differently; he could see solutions where others saw problems. He authored two books and had a gift for helping people rebuild their lives, even fixing their credit when they thought it was impossible.

And then there was me — the computer genius. Technology fascinated me from the start, and I found joy

in creating, building, and solving problems through it. Together, we were the crowning joy of our parents — three sons with different gifts but one shared purpose: to make them proud.

Even though our lives moved at different paces, we always drew wisdom from one another. Shang's creativity inspired me to dream bigger. Deron's intellect taught me to think deeper. And my drive to innovate reminded them both that the world was changing — and we could change with it.

Faith, Discipline, and Enterprise

Faith wasn't optional in our house — it was the air we breathed. My parents made sure we understood that prayer was power, and that discipline was love. I remember sitting in church as a child, legs swinging from the pew, watching my father preach with conviction. His voice carried authority, but his eyes carried compassion. My mother, always graceful, led by example — teaching Sunday school, visiting the sick, and praying for anyone who needed it.

At home, the same values applied. We prayed before meals, before bed, and before making any big decision. My parents didn't just talk about faith — they lived it. And even when I didn't fully understand it, I could feel it shaping me.

But beyond faith, they also taught me the principles of business — watching my father manage employees and contracts, and my mother balance ledgers and clients.

Without realizing it, I was being trained — not just to believe in God, but to believe in myself.

That foundation would become my anchor — even when I drifted far from it.

The City and Its Lessons

Milwaukee had a rhythm all its own. The summers were filled with block parties, barbecues, and music that spilled from open windows. But as I grew older, I began to see the other side — the poverty, the violence, and the temptation that came with trying to survive in a city that didn't always love you back.

I saw friends lose their way. I saw families break apart. And I saw how easily good intentions could be swallowed by bad choices. But through it all, my parents' example kept me grounded. They taught me that no matter where you come from, you can choose where you're going.

That lesson would follow me for the rest of my life.