

FOREWORD

“This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings, and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

Deuteronomy 30:1

In the world of economic development, you will often hear seasoned professionals say, “I’ll take luck over skill any day.” This means that we can work for months or years on a project and win or lose instantly. We like to control things, but in life we can’t control everything. Random issues beyond our control can pop up and cause us to lose a project. The opposite is true as well. We can be the underdog in a major community-changing project and win against all odds. That’s where so-called ‘luck’ comes into play. Your best laid plans come unraveled in an instant. These are the times when you must make a choice. A choice of what your response will be when God throws you a curveball.

Now, some of you may ask what in the world economic development has to do with Dr. Frankie Bell. Let me tell you, it has everything to do with Dr. Bell. I first met Frankie Bell when she was named principal of the middle school in Chambers County Alabama to which my oldest daughter was advancing. As any nervous parent would, I asked a friend of mine if he knew Dr. Bell. He said, “Yes, I do, and she’s amazing. But I’m afraid you two won’t get along. She’s as headstrong as you!” I laughed. Those who know me know that I have a small circle. Few people understand me because I have a tough exterior. I’m quiet, but I’m a fierce competitor. I’m a fixer.

Ten days later, I met Dr. Bell. I could see she was a mover and shaker and would get things done. She looked at me and smiled, then she looked at my mom and said, “It’s so nice to meet you both. Your child is amazing and such a joy to have in our school.” She didn’t have a clue who my mom and I were, or even which child was ours, but she wanted us to know that we mattered. A wonderful friendship began that day, one that consisted of ladies who are strong and have battled fierce demons in their past. Difference makers. As a professional and leader in our community, I knew there were things holding our county, Chambers County, back. The school system was one of those things. Hard conversations would be needed if the county was ever going to make any progress, and we were finally having those conversations. What I had to say made me unpopular with some people. Others were relieved that someone had the guts to say it out loud. That didn’t make it any easier. Harder still, some issues involved Dr. Bell’s school, issues like deteriorating buildings and facilities that needed improvement. We addressed these things, and Dr. Bell took it in stride, knowing it wasn’t aimed at her. She knew it had to happen. Complacency over the years had caused our kids to suffer, and she knew these difficult conversations were well overdue.

Why was it so easy to talk with Dr. Bell? Well, Dr. Bell had one mission, and that mission was to love all kids. She expected the same of her staff. The students loved her, and the teachers loved

her. Her approach worked. School spirit was at an all-time high with Dr. Bell at the helm. Young men and young women had someone to look up to. Discipline was served but with love and firmness that few resisted. I found out the hard way that kids do not learn from listening but from watching. They watch how adults respond to events, be it small, tragic, confrontational, or pleasant. Kids are always watching, and Dr. Bell knows this.

Unfortunately, to paraphrase the poet Walt Whitman, something as golden as this could not last. A day came when Dr. Bell was abruptly and without warning or explanation removed from serving as our leader. The kids, faculty, and parents assuredly didn't understand. Folks wanted to hear from Dr. Bell. Was she okay? Why hadn't she spoken out? Many thought that it has something to do with the upcoming election and the person whom Dr. Bell decided to support.

Yet, Dr. Bell didn't confirm or deny these speculations. In fact, Dr. Bell didn't address our questions at all. She only sent word that "God's got it!" At first, I couldn't understand her silence. Then it dawned on me: she was choosing to win. She was speaking loud and clear, not fighting back her way but in God's way. God was using her to show us how to choose to win.

In total admiration, I watched as my friend was torn down and taken away from the thing she loved most: children. But she never backed off from her principles. Often, Dr. Bell would say to me, "Valerie Gray, it had to happen." What she meant is that it was part of God's plan, a plan that would become clear in time. And when we asked her what we could do, to my amazement she always answered, "Pray for them." Even now she prays for those who attacked her and those who turned their backs on her during those dark days. See, forgiveness is the real win, and this is how Dr. Bell chooses to win. She lives intentionally. And she forgives.

We can dwell on what triggered those dark days. Or we can cut to the chase and recognize that there are two types of leaders in this world: those who rule by fear and those who choose to surround themselves with people they can empower to lead. God's path is not always what we want or choose. But His plans are there to develop us into better people and leaders that will make a great impact on the society for years to come.

When you say the name Dr. Frankie Bell, my mind is immediately flooded with words such as Christian, fighter, overcomer, friend, helper, champion, believer, forgiver, and advocate. After all she's been through, she chooses to wake up each day with a grateful heart. Sometimes it's bruised, sometimes it's bursting with joy.

Either way, she's always grateful. If I've learned anything from her, it's faith and love with intention. Have faith that God is taking you down a path and that you have a choice of how to respond. Will you choose to win? Will you have faith in God and know that not everything is going to be effortless and calm?

This workbook is a reflection on Dr. Bell's Choose to Win. It's intended to help us determine how we will respond and react and make choices when life becomes difficult. As you work through

Leaders-shift, reflect on the challenges she faced. How would you have handled them? More important, how would your life be different now if you had handled your own challenges differently?

Life is a learning process. I'm excited for you, the ones who recognize this and have chosen to put in the work to discover what winning really is.

Valerie Gray,

ALABAMA.