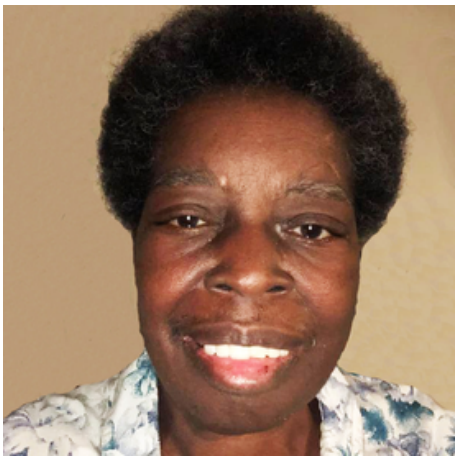

Sandra Leona Watkins Sanders

March 23, 1952 ~ October 12, 2020

Sandra Leona Watkins Sanders—A Biographical Sketch by Clifton Sanders

Sandra Leona Watkins Sanders was born on March 23, 1952 in Merced CA under the original birth certificate name Martha Colleen Woods. She legally changed her birth certificate to her current name about five years ago. Sandra is the second of six children borne by her mother, Dorothy Woods (d 2006). The identity of Sandra's biological father was not known to her. Sandra's siblings include Bernard (deceased), Nancy, Julia, Darren (deceased), and Karla (deceased).

At a very early age, before her her younger siblings were born, Sandra was adopted and raised in Los Angeles CA (she never met her older brother). She remembers that, at a young age she won an award at church for reciting Psalm 23 from memory. Sandra loved and participated in several sports including softball, tennis and racquetball. She attended junior high school in the LA community of Willowbrook and graduated from George Washington High School in 1970.

After high school she briefly attended UCLA but soon dropped out, saying that she was 'more interested in people than books'. Because of conflict at home she took to the streets—working various kinds of jobs, panhandling, experimenting with drugs and surviving with the use of free clinics, food co-ops and street hustling. She lived the life of a nomad, traveling and often hitch hiking as far away as Mississippi and other destinations. Most notably, she moved to Detroit MI where she witnessed her boyfriend killed while defending his family in a drug deal gone bad.

The trauma of the murder led Sandra to return to LA to live with her adoptive mother and grandmother, whom she truly loved despite difficulties with her mom. Unfortunately, things did not work out and Sandra soon returned to street life. She remembers during that time a woman quoted to her Joel 2:25 'Whoever calls upon the Lord will be saved'. Sandra recalls an incident where, after taking quaaludes, this scripture came back to her memory after she realized that she could not 'feel my face'.

She continued on her northward journey to San Francisco, where she briefly dabbled in witchcraft. Realizing that, for her, this was 'too real,' she quickly left and eventually found a Shiloh Youth Revival Christian ministry house, where she received Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, and she became part of the community. Shiloh Youth Revival Ministries was affiliated with Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, CA.

Sandra spent time at the ministry headquarters in Eugene, OR working in their tree planting business and receiving training in discipleship and evangelism. She made several friends and started learning to play guitar in a minimalist, banjo-inspired folk style. After her training, she spent a small amount of time in WA picking apples, and on another trip she harvested Christmas trees. Next, Sandra was sent to do tent maker evangelism in New Haven CT where she worked at the Chart House Restaurant and lived at the ministry house. Due to an incident with house leaders

regarding her gospel music listening preferences she left the house, moved to Boston MA and found a job working at a laundry in West Roxbury. Shortly thereafter she got engaged but ‘broke up because God had someone better for me.’ Eventually, one of her friends from the New Haven ministry persuaded her to return.

At this point the Shiloh ministry began reducing their nationwide outreach. Sandra moved to a house in Ohio and she worked as a waitress. In 1977 she moved to the Park City, UT ministry, where she also continued to develop her guitar skills. During the winter she cooked and sold hamburgers at an outdoor grill for ski patrons. She liked to recount an incident where a teenage Marie Osmond and her entourage came to Sandra’s grill station for hamburgers after Sandra had started shutting down for the day. In keeping with her stubbornly independent and defiant nature, Sandra did not restart the grill, despite Marie and her friends’ pleadings. Sandra formed deep and lifelong friendships with many of her Park City friends and partners in ministry.

She moved to Phoenix, AZ for a job opportunity. While visiting friends in Salt Lake City in summer, 1980 she met her future husband, Clifton, whom she first saw as little more than someone annoying her while she was indulging her inner ‘geek’ —playing with guitars, amps and any gadget in the band rehearsal room—this would be a recurring theme in their future relationship. She was just polite enough to say ‘hi, nice to meet you but I’m busy here so if you will excuse me...’

Later that year Sandra moved from Phoenix to Salt Lake City and lived for a short period with church friends followed by moving into a ministry boarding house (The Agape House) run by Calvary Chapel of Salt Lake City. Sandra found work as a salad cook at the University of Utah’s Bailiff Hall dormitory (now the site of the Lassonde Center). She quickly advanced to breakfast cook. It was also during this time that she and Clifton began spending time cultivating their friendship, sharing stories and mutual comfort in being the rare African Americans in a warm Christian community that, although always supportive and sympathetic, still lacked capacity to comfortably apprehend our shared cultural experiences.

In 1982, Sandra moved to San Diego and attended the Horizon School of Evangelism for a year. During that time, she and Clifton kept in regular contact by phone. Sandra moved back to Salt Lake City in 1983. Shortly thereafter, Sandra and Clifton began dating in earnest and they became engaged in August 1983. Clifton, a University of Utah graduate student on work study, and Sandra had very little money and scarce means, but through the grace of God and the love of their church community, were married on April 1, 1984 and began their new life together.

Despite their early hardships they truly enjoyed their adventures together, cherishing and learning within the simplicity of each other’s company, shared interests and striking contrasts—Sandra’s fierce individualism, her unique system of nonverbal communication (which stemmed from childhood stuttering, coupled with a lifetime of street smarts and wisdom), her writings and reflections, her love for Agatha Christie mystery novels, and her and Clifton’s addiction to Doonesbury and Far Side anthologies. Sandra’s love for late 1950’s soul music and female singers was a calming counterweight to Clifton’s forays into the complex world of jazz. Her quietness was often the stealth vehicle for well-timed, understated but unerringly disarming ‘one-liners’ that playfully deflated Clifton’s (and many others) penchant for pseudo-intellectual bombast. For example, she named Clifton and their friend, Louie Mercer, (the minister who officiated their wedding) ‘Jaws 1 and Jaws 2.’ Sandra, with toothpick sticking out of the corner of her mouth, and wearing her trademark Las Vegas high roller poker visor, team up with Terry Mercer (Louie’s spouse) to regularly and mercilessly beat Louie and Clifton at any and every card game (Clifton is still traumatized to this day).

In 1986 Sandra enrolled at Salt Lake Community College and took business courses for a year. She also received recognition for her leadership in the SLCC chapter of Campus Crusade for Christ.

Taking a break from her studies, she responded to several promptings from her Lord. Telling Clifton that, years before, God told her that she would be working with children, she started teaching Sunday School at Calvary Chapel of Salt Lake City. She also became a church planter, working with David Stewart to start the former Southwest Calvary Chapel. And she provided encouragement and protection to Clifton as he juggled the demands of church leadership, full-time work, and completing his PhD in 1989. Sandra was also one of the key ‘back room’ helpers to launch the Utah Institute for Biblical Studies (later Salt Lake Theological Seminary and now The Vine Institute), providing bookkeeping and registration assistance in the early years. She engaged in numerous

evangelistic outreaches, street ministry and ministry partnerships. Sandra managed the Christian Embassy bookstore outreach in downtown Salt Lake City for a year as well.

The years 1985-1989 brought Sandra and Clifton many financial hardships and professional setbacks (including a church breakup, frustrating delays in completing graduate work, etc.). But through it all, Sandra's love, faith, wisdom and quietness provided profound strength to her community of friends—- this is just one example of her indelible legacy—'People more than books.'

Sandra returned to college in 1991 at the University of Utah. She pursued a business major but eventually switched to history because of the ethnic studies courses that rekindled her interest in the 1960's Civil Rights movement. Unfortunately at that time, the University of Utah did not have an ethnic studies major— therefore history was the closest alternative available. As a history major, Sandra's best academic work were two research projects. She completed an oral history project surveying two generations of Clifton's maternal lineage, titled 'A Different Kind of Statistic' and Clifton made hardbound copies which they presented to the family. Sandra's senior thesis project, according to her professor, was one of the first historical accounts of early bowling leagues in Salt Lake City.

But Sandra was far more than a typical student. She served as Vice-President of the Black Student Union and she was on the University bowling team for four years, garnering a tournament MVP award for her sportsmanship and steady improvement. She also bowled in club leagues year round.

In addition to Sandra's love for people, her most enduring college legacy was her participation on the student leadership team that persuaded University of Utah faculty to implement a Diversity requirement as part of the General Education curriculum— one of the first institutions in Utah to do this. Given that this requirement started in the early 1990's, easily tens of thousands of students have been impacted and, perhaps, transformed by that groundbreaking act.

Sandra graduated with her bachelors degree in history in 1996. Up to this point in their marriage Sandra and Clifton were not successful in having children of their own, although they had several godchildren and were designated in several friends' wills as legal guardians for their minor children. But Sandra also had a desire to adopt a child out of gratitude for her being adopted, even despite the trauma and difficulties she experienced growing up. In 1996 Sandra and Clifton were presented with an opportunity from close friends to adopt a baby. After prayerful consideration, they agreed and were welcomed by the birth family into key parts of the pregnancy. When the gender of the child was revealed as male, Sandra and Clifton named him Nathaniel—Gift of God.

Nathaniel was born in 1997. This was a pivotal year for other reasons as well. Sandra had begun work for H&R Block as a tax analyst, which turned into a 20-year career, rising through the ranks to Senior Tax Analyst, with occasional roles as office manager and supervisor. She loved helping people with their taxes, using her knowledge, experience, common-sense wisdom and friendliness to continually uplift her office colleagues, who always spoke of her fondly. Also, as an independent employee, she was able to occasionally reduce or waive her fees to help clients support the work of Christian missionaries and other charitable endeavors.

Also, in 1997, Clifton launched his career as a professional musician, resulting in a 6-year run with Soul Patrol, a 10-piece 'rhythm and blues revue'. Sandra played a key role as she sold a large number of albums at concerts, hawked band merchandise and was embraced by the entire band and by many fans. This was also an especially nice way to spend family time. Road trips to Jackson Hole WY were great fun and summer concerts at lots of outdoor venues were perfect for toddler Nathaniel to run around and have a great time. During and after the Soul Patrol years, Clifton and Sandra developed lifelong, deep bonds with George and Hannah Brown. From that time forward, as Clifton grew as a musician under George's patient mentorship and leadership of the G Brown Quintet, Sandra and Hannah also became lifelong 'family' as well. In later years, Sandra filmed G Brown Quintet performances and assisted with the band Facebook pages. It has been an incredible blessing for Sandra and Clifton to share life and music with George and Hannah and our families.

Raising Nathaniel was an absolute joy for Sandra from the very beginning. There was innocent concern by some that her relative shyness might inhibit Nathaniel's cognitive development. This concern was quickly dispelled when people saw Sandra singing to Nathaniel all the time, reading him stories, playing with him, relishing her role as a mom, comfortably negotiating the contours of an 'open' adoption, providing comfort and wisdom to a maturing

Nathaniel, and patiently helping Clifton to see adoption realities with new eyes.

The process of adopting Nathaniel required stronger identity verification than Sandra's ID at that time. With the help of a clergyman who was also a lawyer we obtained an ID card that satisfied the mandatory background checks that allowed the adoption to proceed.

At the same time, Clifton successfully (miraculously) obtained a copy of Sandra's original Martha Colleen Woods birth certificate from the Merced County, CA records office. Having this unleashed strong urges in Sandra to connect with her biological roots. From 1997-1999 Sandra joined biological parent search groups, combed genealogical records, posted two websites with her writings and reflections, and made contact with the larger adoption search communities. She made many friends, some of whom traveled to Salt Lake City to spend time with her to share experiences and advice.

Nevertheless, eventually all Sandra's leads proved fruitless. Fortunately, one of her chat room friends suggested that she place an ad in the Merced newspaper. After about a week, Sandra received a call from a woman who said 'I think I can help you'. Very soon after that, Sandra was on the phone talking with Dorothy Woods Chandler, her birth mother. This timing was fortuitous because the annual Merriman extended family reunion (Sandra's biological relatives) was scheduled for that year's Labor Day weekend at Yosemite Park near her birthplace of Merced, CA.

So Sandra, Nathaniel and Clifton went to the family reunion. Sandra was warmly welcomed into the family, as many aunts, uncles and others knew about her but wondered what happened to her after more than 45 years. It was easy to lose track because Sandra was the only one of her biological siblings to be taken out of Merriman clan to be raised far away.

Sandra's reunion with Dorothy was bittersweet. It took quite some time for Dorothy and Sandra to build a comfortable relationship with each other and reconcile their feelings about the time lost between them. This also happened to a lesser extent with other new found relatives who were overwhelmed with Sandra's desire for closeness and closure. Early on, Sandra seemed to form a special bond with her younger brother, Darren who, despite being diabetic, had a similar zest for life and defiant spirit. Eventually, the biological family relationships settled into an acceptable norm. Sandra supported her niece's summer mission trip to Ghana with Campus Crusade for Christ, and we attended the Las Vegas wedding of another niece. 'Auntie Sandra' kept in touch with many Merriman relatives via her Facebook page. We also attended several other family reunions, with our last trip occurring in 2016 to the reunion in Riverside CA.

Dorothy passed away in 2006 and Sandra traveled to Merced for her funeral. Several years later Darren passed away from diabetes-related complications. Sandra continued contact with her sisters Nancy and Julia.

When Nathaniel was 18 months old we enrolled him in the St John's Lutheran Church Child Development preschool program. This allowed Sandra to resume work at H&R Block during tax season, but it also afforded her an unexpected opportunity. Sandra had played guitar for years in small groups, Bible studies, and worship services. But she also had a love for older popular songs that she would play by herself, arranging these songs in her own unique slow finger-picking, banjo-inspired style. Because of her favorite duo, Tuck and Patti, Sandra began to incorporate subtle elements of Tuck Andress' guitar style into her playing and highly original arrangements. Clifton, already playing professionally in two bands, encouraged Sandra to play in a duo with him on alto and soprano saxophone and flute and her on guitar performing her repertoire. We did this at the annual preschool fundraiser for several years. Sandra quickly became very comfortable, and bossy sometimes, playing out this way. She named our duo 'Urban Bush' and we were hired and paid on several occasions. These included conferences and wedding receptions, most notably a large wedding reception at La Caille, a Salt Lake gourmet restaurant and conference center. Sandra also performed at a worship service with award-winning Nashville harmonica session player TJ Klay. Later, Sandra finally acquired a banjo and began playing regularly at church and at private gatherings in her deliberate style, reminiscent of Rhiannon Giddens and the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

On October 26, 2006 Sandra had just exited from a southbound transit bus. As she entered the intersection going south, a northbound car made a blind left turn around the bus as it barely cleared the intersection. The car struck Sandra and flung her across the hood (there was another woman in the intersection who told Sandra later that she pushed her clear before the car struck). Sandra was taken to the hospital for surgery to repair her broken leg.

Because of other health complications the surgery was unsuccessful and Sandra spent seven weeks in a convalescent facility. After her release two more surgeries were required before she could bear weight on her leg; the last surgery involved permanently inserting a metal rod for stability. After several months recuperating Sandra had to completely relearn how to walk. Despite her injuries from October 2006 to April 2007, Sandra exhibited a remarkable grace and serenity that deeply moved everyone who visited her. It was also during this time that Sandra took up photography in earnest, taking her wheelchair or walker to the front door and taking pictures of the sky, often imaginatively capturing images that defy explanation, especially given the part of town where we lived. She continued her photography for the rest of her life. Her photos have been displayed at her church, through websites and now on her Facebook page. In 2008 an online friend from New England compiled and published for Sandra a collection of her pictures as 'Guitbowl Sky' ('guit(ar)bowl(ing)' or 'guitbowl', is Sandra's moniker on social media).

Sandra resumed normal life and motherhood as much as possible. In summer 2008 a blood test revealed that she had Hepatitis C. This required a six month treatment plan with regular self-injections of interferon along with ribovirin treatments to reduce viral load levels to below detectability.

Throughout this and later health episodes Sandra was able to recover enough to continue working during tax season. Despite Sandra's independent and rebel streak, she also possessed a remarkable ability to be upbeat and place her trust in God through all circumstances because of his lifelong faithfulness to her. This may also be in part because of an incident that occurred shortly after she met Clifton. One New Years Eve Sandra and Clifton went with a Shiloh friend, DeEtta Barta, to a fellowship party in Park City. On the way back to Salt Lake City early New Year's Day, during the ride Sandra recalls that she was admiring the sky and wondered what it would be like to be among the stars. She says she heard a voice that said 'Come on', and she experienced herself out of body, free of earthly constraints and frolicking with God in the sky. Then it ended and, although that saddened her, since that time, through her music (she has her own favorite arrangement of Swing Low Sweet Chariot), her photography, her suffering and even her resistance against being typecast and defined by others perceptions and judgments, Sandra has longed for the freedom and release she experienced that New Year's early morning.

There have been a steady stream of health challenges since, including the recurrence of Hepatitis C that was finally eradicated in 2015. She persevered, cherishing everything and everyone in her Mountain Springs Church community, from women's Bible Study to soup suppers, potluck picnics and Sunday fellowship. In all her communities, Sandra was content and unpretentious—all she needed was to be comfortable in the mix with good friends, playfulness, wry one-liners and fist bumps with kids of all ages. Her her lifelong devotion to Nathaniel and her love for our family has been a quiet but undeniable and inspirational force. Many who read this will be surprised at the scope and depth of Sandra's life and accomplishments. Many who underestimated or sentimentalized her will be humbled by her perseverance and achievements, all as a true servant and servant-leader. She had no need for people to know her entire 'story' but it is clearly a narrative of faith formed and refined through God watching over her as her true (and really, only) Father, meeting her repeatedly with love and surprise, and letting her taste a little bit of the resurrection life.

As 2018 unfolded Sandra experienced rapid weight gain and fatigue. In February 2018 Sandra was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and hospitalized for several weeks to remove excess fluid. At the end of that time, doctors discovered that systemic scleroderma, an incurable autoimmune disorder that eventually stiffens connective and organ tissue, along with pulmonary arterial hypertension, was the real underlying cause of Sandra's health decline. When we gathered our pastor and his spouse to pray with us after first hearing the news, Sandra recounted her New Year's morning experience and she comforted Nathaniel. To the very end she continued to comfort, and she repeatedly asked if we are going to be ok. Sandra's treatment team at the University of Utah remarked:

'We have been honoured to take care of her. Her class, kindness and grace has made us better people.'

Sandra told me that she loved to see the smile on the face of her lead physician, Dr. John Ryan, when she asked him about his wife and daughters. She really enjoyed seeing him beaming when talking to her about his family. All the team members, floor nurses, technicians and staff have told me repeatedly how they loved working with Sandra and how her kindness affected them. In her final days Sandra showed Clifton the screen saver words she kept on her phone:

“...And to wake up Knowing God is on my side...is enough...”

And, in her meetings with Pastor Peter DeVries and his wife Holly, who is one of Sandra’s dearest friends and ‘Back Row Ministry’ co-conspirator, she enjoyed hearing him recite the King James Version of Psalm 23 whenever they visited during her final days.

Sandra’s decline was unexpectedly fast. Less than a week before, she was cooking her own meals and washing dishes daily. She was often out of bed and in the living room or taking her wheelchair to the front porch by herself to sit outside and take pictures, read quietly and wave at neighbors. Exactly one week before her passing, she asked Clifton to buy her a new, smaller wheelchair (her other wheelchair was purchased when she was twice her current weight) so she could maneuver more directly from her bedroom through the rest of the upstairs. After work the next day Clifton set out to find the store where he bought her first wheelchair (and nearly all her other mobility products)

In her passing Sandra leaves behind her husband and partner Clifton, their beloved son Nathaniel and her sisters Nancy and Julia in California. She also leaves behind hundreds of friends, relatives, associates, acquaintances and co-laborers in God’s harvest worldwide. It is New Year’s Day for her. Her songs of remembrance are ‘To God Be the Glory’ by Andre Crouch and her recorded duets with Clifton.