

Double Duty

Herman Moody fought for truth and justice, as well as a future for black cops in Vegas

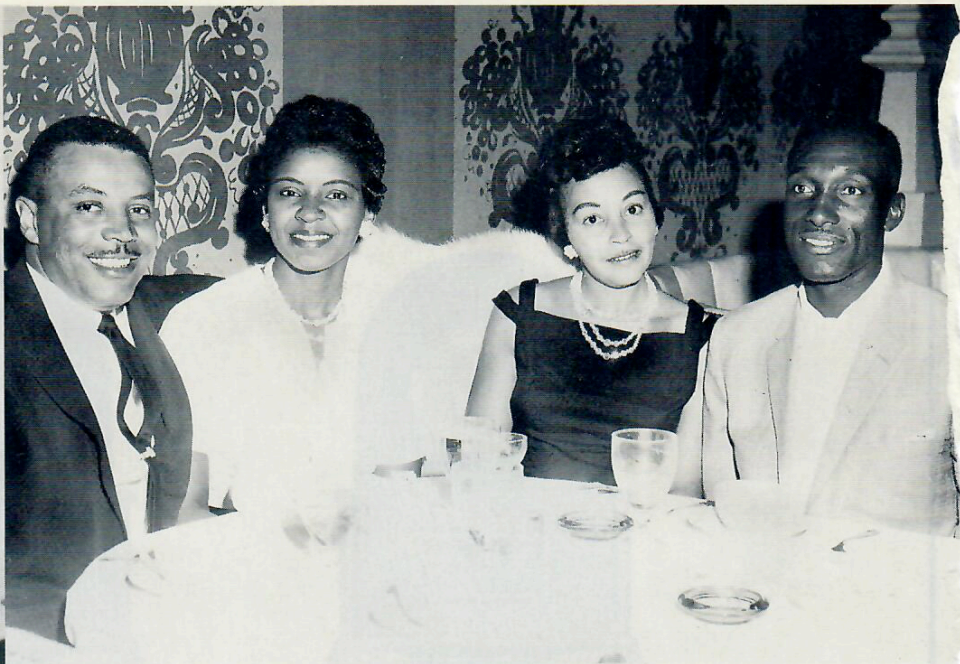
BY GREG BLAKE MILLER

The din lasted from dawn deep into the northwest night. Masked welders and sandblasters toiled among the sparks at Puget Sound Naval Base, making American ships fit to fight. Officers monitored the course of the war in the Pacific. Young recruits trained for battle. It was early 1944, and Bremerton, Washington, was a nest of anxious activity. Nineteen-year-old Herman Moody was feeling left out.

Years later, as the patriarch of Las Vegas' African-American policemen, Moody would be known and admired as a man who seldom complained, a hard-nosed stoic who spoke with his actions. But as a naval recruit in the most desperate days of World War II, Moody decided that if he didn't speak up, there wouldn't be any action.

"I went to the executive officer of the base, went in dungarees, not even my dress whites," Moody recalls. "He says, 'Seaman Moody, what's the problem?' I say, 'I've been here nine months, and I don't see where I'm doing any good as a military man. The things I'm doing, I could be doing at home: washing, cooking, making beds.' The officer sat me down. He says, 'You're doing a bigger job than you think.'" In the war effort, the officer said, every last detail counts.

Moody Family Collection



"It made sense," Moody says. "I wasn't pleased, but it made sense."

The visit, however, got the officer thinking. "Not two weeks later," Moody says, "a group of us black guys was dispatched for commando training, working with mortar, grenades, rifles. Before, there had been none of that. Guys said, 'How'd you do that?'"

"I guess I got some results."

WE TEND TO PLACE CERTAIN MYTHOLOGICAL expectations on agents of change: We expect our revolutionaries to be, well, revolutionary. But for every firebrand, there is also a quiet hero, breaking his way through brick by brick, changing tools and pace when he needs to, but never forgetting that the wall must come down. Baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson was this type of hero; he and Herman Moody (a lifelong Dodger fan) are, in many ways, parallel figures who shared an era, a mission and a temperament, one that enabled Herman, when necessary, to simmer silently and let his deeds do the talking. He was aided by a steely self-discipline, a genuine enjoyment of others' company and a desire to do good. When he was assigned to patrol West Las Vegas—a small world away from the more prestigious Downtown beat—he took it as a challenge to help the community he lived in. Later, he became the town's first black motorcycle cop and, in time, would attend elite federal law enforcement courses and work undercover in cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Administration. But he had to be extraordinarily patient in waiting for these opportunities.

"He was a good officer, one of the best," says 80-year-old Hiram Powell, a white former

Metro chief of detectives who worked with Moody for more than 20 years. "Everybody loved him. Everywhere he went, every detail he worked, he was liked."

When local officers set out four years ago to launch a police museum, Moody's holster was one of the first items on their wish list. The Nevada Chapter of the National Black Police Association, meanwhile, has instituted an award in Moody's name for officers making outstanding contributions to both the force and the community. Like Jackie Robinson, Moody got traction in his career by being one of the guys. And like Robinson, he became a veteran whom others looked up to. There is a point, though, at which Moody's story departs from Robinson's: The ballplayer was named MVP in the prime of his career; the cop never made captain.

MOODY WAS A POLICEMAN FROM 1946 to 1977. He became a detective while still relatively young, but then the promotions stopped—for good. Three times in the first half of his career he took the promotion test, each time scoring in a range that generally stood promotion-seekers in good stead. On his last test, he recalls, he scored in the high 80s (on a scale of 100) and was placed first in line for advancement. It never came.

"I said, well, I know the situation is still there, and I just forgot about it. I didn't take the test anymore. I decided to do the next best thing." To better support his family, Moody took a demanding full-time job in his off-duty hours; to support a wider cause, he began to teach.

Pulling together the law-enforcement texts and law books he'd been studying on his own for years, Moody held classes for young black

policemen at his West Las Vegas home (whites attended, too). One by one, he reasoned, the students would prove their excellence beyond all doubt. The classes went on for more than 20 years. In 1983, Moody's star student, Larry Bolden, became Metro's first black deputy chief. Now 77, Moody continues his watch as others—including family members—climb the ladder as well.

"Herman told me that as a black man you have to work twice as hard as the other guy," says Moody's ex-son-in-law Greg McCurdy, a captain. "He doesn't talk about any negatives. If anyone could sit back and complain, it's him, but he's never done it. ... He taught us that as long as we realize the world's not perfect, we can navigate through it. You have to be hopelessly aware: If there's a requirement, you have to meet it and then some."

ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON IN THE SPRING of 1939, a black family in a white Plymouth rumbled into downtown Las Vegas. That morning, Henry Moody, a lumberjack, had packed up the car, drained and refilled the frosted radiator, and shoveled the northern Arizona snow out from around the tires. Then he and his two teenagers—14-year-old Herman and his big sister, Susie—headed north out of McNary. They were on the way to Klamath Falls, Oregon, and a better future in the lumber business.

The Plymouth had other ideas. At the Chrysler dealership on the corner of First and Ogden, the Moodys were told their ride had blown a head gasket. The mechanics, though, were already off duty; it couldn't be fixed until Monday.



Herman Moody as a father (with daughter Mignon), as a husband (right, with wife Magnolia and a couple of friends) and as a soldier during World War II.

There was nowhere in Las Vegas for black travelers to stay. That night, Henry and the kids parked the car on First Street between Ogden and Stewart and slept there. The next morning, a tall black man approached the car, greeted Henry and offered him a job as a porter. Henry accepted.

"He was gone a good while," Moody says. "Come late evening, Dad comes walking back from Fremont Street and pulls this money out. Eight silver dollars. I said, 'Man, where'd you get that kind of money?' He'd made some tokes. That wasn't even his pay yet!"

The Moody family never did make it to Klamath Falls.

AFTER GRADUATING IN 1943 from Las Vegas High, where he'd been a basketball star, Moody went into the Navy. After commando training, he went to sea as gunner's mate, steward and cook aboard a segregated ship. He had more than 20 men under his leadership, ensuring that all supplies were present and in order. The ship patrolled the North Pacific and secured the Aleutian island of Attu from the Japanese. Moody rose to the rank of chief petty officer before returning home in 1945.

The last thing he had in mind was to end up in uniform again.

"I detested the idea of being back under military supervision. Engineering was my ambition. I was pretty good in math. After high school, I'd put in my résumé to Tuskegee

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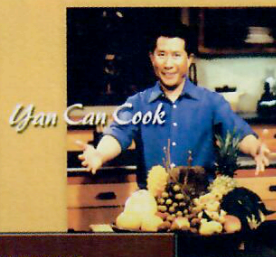
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Institute, but I never did get a response. After the Navy, I was all set to go to engineering school in LA.”

Then Chuck Morris came knocking. A sports-loving detective, he'd watched Moody dominate the basketball court in high school. “He said, ‘We’ve got policemen, but we want someone who has the ability to do what we want to do, and we think you’re the man. I said, ‘I’m going to school first of the year.’ He said, ‘If you don’t like it, you can quit anytime.’ I said, ‘That’s fair.’”

The department had Moody take an IQ exam. His scores were high. He started work on November 1, 1946 and didn’t leave the job for 31 years.

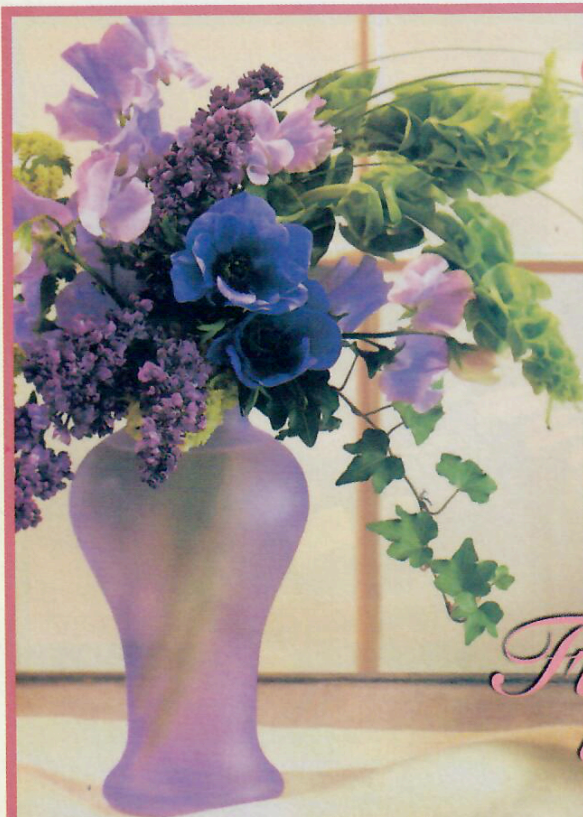
MOODY WASN’T LAS VEGAS’ FIRST BLACK police officer. One was already on the job when he was still in high school. At least two others had come on in the meantime. But they all moved on to other opportunities before long. When Moody joined the force, there was a black officer named Joe Harris, but he left after a couple of months. Moody was on his own.

A longtime Las Vegas familiar with police politics says that, at the start, Moody had to contend with the notion that he’d been brought in as a token. “There was a lot of segregation here, and he had a tough time. Every time an exam came up, they [wouldn’t promote him]. ... I imagine he was able to do a lot of good for the people on the Westside, because he was able to hang in there. A lot of black cops weren’t able to.”

Poise and patience helped Moody survive, but his capacity to connect with others helped him thrive. As a boy in Arizona, Moody had played with the children of other lumberjacks, be they white or Hispanic or Native American. In the rough-and-tumble games of the pine forests and mountain ridges, initiative and leadership were what mattered. Now, on a Vegas force largely made up of the sons of white ranchers, Moody began to make friends quickly. As in high school, sports became a way to bridge racial gaps. Moody, playing alongside future Sheriff Ralph Lamb, became the star of the department basketball team. Later, he went on annual hunting trips to British Columbia with fellow officers, public officials and judges.

One of Moody’s friends was Hiram Powell, a rodeo cowboy from Electra, Texas, who had joined the force in 1942. Powell eventually became chief of detectives, and, at 80, still mans the detective bureau’s front desk as a part-time civilian employee. “Herman and I arrested a lot of people together,” Powell recalls. “He was a very energetic man, a good, no-nonsense officer. He had good common sense. That’s what it takes out there in the field. He did his job and did it well.”

IN THE FIRST DECADES OF MOODY’S career, Las Vegas nightclubs adhered to a poli-



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cy that invariably began with the words, "We reserve the right to refuse service ..." Occasionally, black visitors came to town and refused to be refused. Club managers sometimes called the police, who weren't quite sure what to do.

"Officers called me and asked me to come explain the policy," Moody recalls. "They'd say, 'I don't want to put them in jail.' I'd say, 'Well, you can't put them in jail without charging them, and you can't charge them because there's no law, just this 'policy.' And you can't arrest people on a policy."

Perhaps it was his early taste for the intricacies of engineering, perhaps it was an optimistic sense that justice was hidden somewhere in the thicket of written law, but Moody the cop often thought like a lawyer. When he came on the force, there was no police academy, no real training; officers were expected to enforce the law without grasping its nuances.

"I got some law-enforcement books and started reading them, studying for myself, learning how to do the things I hadn't been able to do," Moody says. "I could investigate a traffic accident and put it correctly on paper according to state, city and federal ordinances. When they started hiring a few blacks, I set up the classes on how to use the code. When you arrest someone, you've got to know what you're arresting them for."

In a town where arbitrary racial policies contradicted the letter of the law, the law could be a friend to the black man. Moody built his career as an officer and a mentor on the notion that absolute objectivity was the only road to fairness. "You can't have preconceived notions. You use practical analysis, scientific method," he says. Without objectivity, all you've got is guesswork. In essence, you end up with profiling: racial, economic, and the usual intertwining of the two. "Racial profiling relegates everything to who's got the most money, who dresses the dressiest, who's got the best attorney."

McCurdy remembers what Moody told him about objectivity. "He said, 'When I got out of the Navy and took the badge, I took this job seriously. I treat everyone the same.'"

Even family.

OVER THE YEARS, MOODY'S FATHER, Henry, had worked his way up to a good job at the Timet plant in Henderson. "He was the kind of guy who, if you're around him, you're gonna like him," Moody says. But as he aged, Henry began drinking whiskey. A lot of it.

"My dad made friends easily," Moody says. "He'd bring white people to the clubs in West Las Vegas, buy them drinks. But then they'd say something and he'd get mad and ..." Occasionally, a brawl would break out. "Other cops wouldn't arrest him because he's my dad," Moody says. "So I fixed him."

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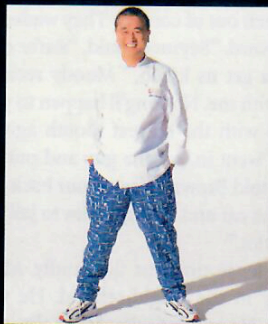
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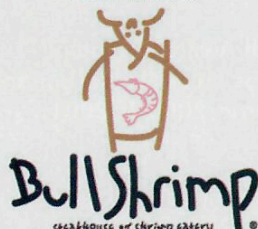


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On the last of his wild nights, Henry was out in front of the El Morocco, holding the keys to his truck and threatening to drive. Policemen were keeping him at bay, offering to take him home, sweet-talking and reasoning with Herman's old man, who was having none of it. The more they talked, the more disrespectful he got. Finally, they called in Herman.

"He'd rather see anyone come but me or my mom," Moody says. "We were the enemy. So I arrested him; I put him in jail. The next day he appears before Judge Walter Richards, and he let my dad talk and talk, then he says, 'Let me tell you, Mr. Moody, you've got a good son here. I think a lot of Officer Moody.'"

"Dad said, 'I do, too.'"

"The judge says, 'Then why can't you obey him? He bends over backward to keep you out of trouble. I'll give you six months in jail and a \$500 fine.'"

"Dad straightens up at hearing that. He's got his job to think of now. Then the judge tells the bailiff, 'You release him now and let him work, but every night for six months he has to come back to jail.'"

"That straightened Dad out. If he held a grudge, he never did say it."

Henry never did drink again. When he died in 1983, at the age of 83, his son found 20-year-old unopened bottles of whiskey hidden in shadowed corners of the house. "He'd forgotten where they were," Moody says.

IN THE MID-'60S, RACE RIOTS SET INNER-cities ablaze from Newark to Watts. Young rebels called cops "pigs" and "oppressors." And as tension rose in West Las Vegas, Herman Moody found himself across the figurative barricades from his own neighbors.

Moody and a white trainee named Seymour Brown were working larceny detail at the time, and they were asked to quell a demonstration that had gotten out of control. They waded into the angry crowd. "Seymour said, 'You're crazy; you're gonna get us killed,'" Moody recalls. "I said, 'Stick with me. Nothing'll happen to you.' I saw the guy with the biggest mouth agitating the crowd. I went in, got the guy and put cuffs on him and told Brown to cover our back. I put the guy in the car and brought him to jail. That quelled the riot."

It was a tense time for the family. Moody was popular in the neighborhood. He was a scout leader. He and his wife, Magnolia, sponsored baseball teams. They were active in their church. Their five daughters had a wide network of young friends who'd been paying after-school visits to the Moody home for years. But Moody was, after all, a cop.

"When you live in the area where the riots are, you don't know what people are going to do. I brought my two oldest girls into the rec room and showed them how to use my shotguns. I'd



Moody became a detective while still relatively young, but then the promotions stopped for good.

never done that before. I told them the procedure to follow so they'd know what to do if there was trouble. Fortunately, nothing happened."

AT THE START OF HIS CAREER, MOODY was assigned to police West Las Vegas. It was not the ideal posting for career advancement: Moody could only make arrests within his own territory, while the big, attention-getting busts were made several miles away in Downtown.

Working the Westside, however, had long-term benefits. Moody practiced what today might be called "community policing": He knew the shopkeepers, the kids, the anxious parents and the activist ministers of the neighborhood. His evenhanded methods won him trust in the area, enough trust to create some awkward situations for his family.

"I had a good camaraderie with people," Moody says. "Some of the worst criminals would come into town, and black people would tell them, 'This guy will treat you right' and send them to my door. They wouldn't give themselves up to anyone else. ... They'd come and knock and tell me they're wanted for murder in California. They'd ask me to take 'em to jail. 'I don't want to go with those other guys,' they'd say. 'They'll shoot me before I get back to jail.' I'd call and check the

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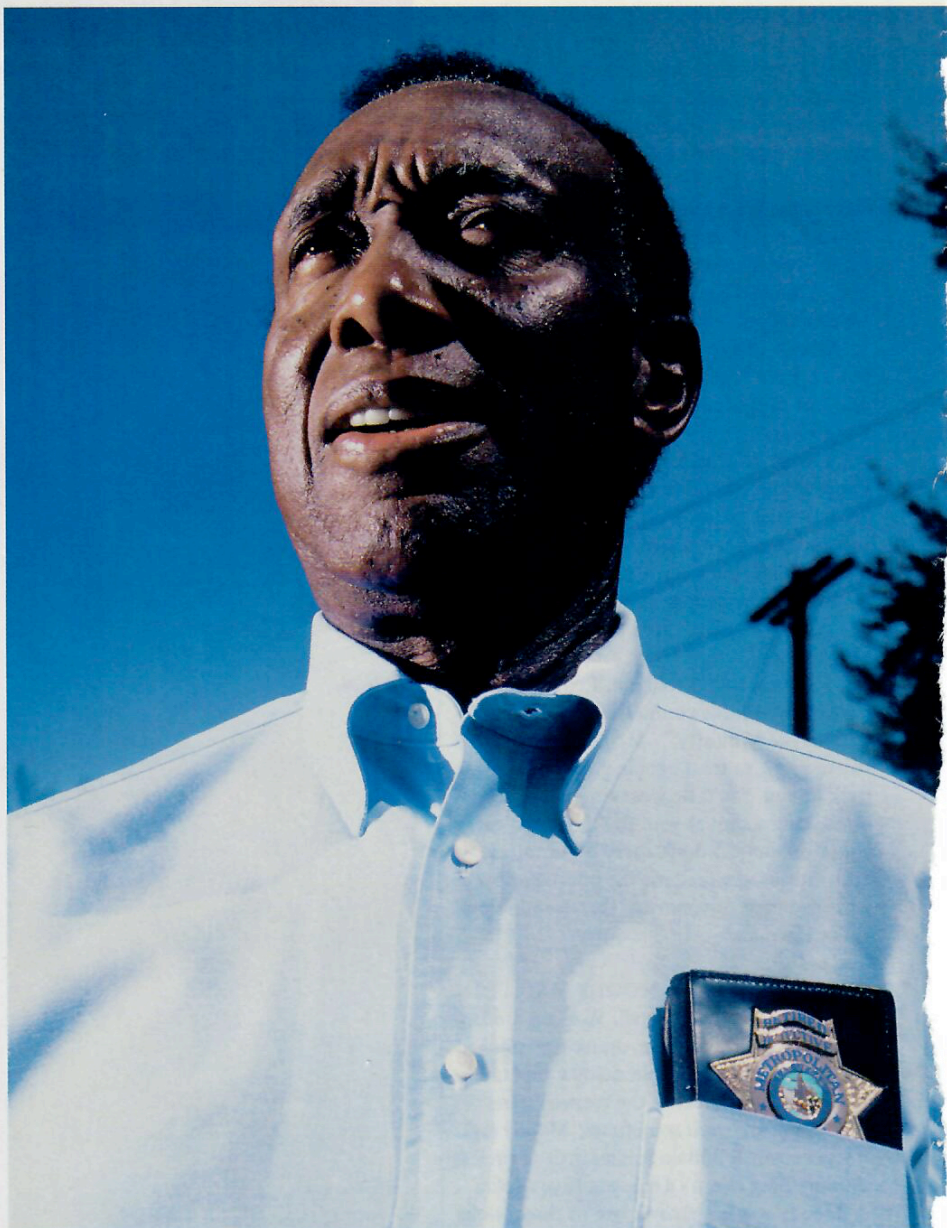
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It turns out one of my girls was there. She walks up to me and laughs and says, 'What are you doing here, Daddy?' I didn't blow my cover. I don't remember the exact words I said, but they were *unique*."

WITH FIVE DAUGHTERS AND NO PROMOTION, Moody had to moonlight. Eight hours. Every day. He was part of a generation of cops, black and white, who slept very little. "Everybody worked two jobs," Powell says. "We had to. There's guys in the detective bureau now who make more money a day than I did in a month."

Moody's solution was to go into the cement business. He learned the craft, joined the union and, bit by bit, acquired what his police salary could never have given him: a nest egg. Like his

father before him, he built his own house. He sent three of his daughters to private colleges. And there was still enough left over for a decent retirement. But when he left the force in 1977, he couldn't pull himself out of cement. In the 1990s, septuagenarian Moody helped build the Monte Carlo.

"We said, 'slow down,'" says Moody's granddaughter Shanta Dumas, 30. "He was in the financial position where his golden years should be spent traveling, but he had no desire to do that. The stroke was the only thing that got him to slow down."

The 1999 stroke left Moody with a partially paralyzed right side. After speech and physical therapy, he moves about his house with a pronounced limp but a surprising nimbleness. He speaks with only a slight slur. He'll

Jenna Bodnar



Canadian hunting trips, photos of him from his Navy days, commendations for his police work and mountains of randomly stacked family albums. It is a family man's refuge, a place where there is no divide between toughness and tenderness. Snapshots of seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren sit on table tops and bookshelves. Alongside them, framed, is Moody's badge.

It has been a tough life, and a good one.

"If he didn't have to face everything that he faced, we wouldn't have the individual we have," Dumas says. "I don't look at it as bad that he didn't accomplish some of the things he wanted to. Life isn't about what we want, but about what God has laid out for us. Three attempts at the promotion test—obviously it wasn't what God wanted to be. Whether it was a matter of discrimination or just timing, he worked through it and held his head high.

"And he was vindicated," adds Dumas, who is married to a police officer and has a 12-year-old son. "When the next guy came along, there was no way to deny him."

THE GRANDKIDS AND GREAT GRAND-kids and neighborhood kids still visit the

**"Don't worry
about the next
fella. You don't
have time to
worry about
what he's doing."**

shake hands with his left hand, but with a firmness that reminds you of the athlete who, well into his 70s, still played pick-up games of basketball.

Magnolia, Moody's wife of 50 years, is only occasionally able to provide such reminders of her vibrant past. A former probation officer, she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease two years ago; the ailment intensified quickly, and now, on the difficult days, she holds herself with a strained and silent stillness—at once dignified and terribly frustrated—that comes with a disease that can trap the thoughts inside one's head. At least one of the Moody girls is at the house every day to help take care of her. Herman, meanwhile, spends a good deal of time in a wood-lined study decorated with moose heads from

Moody's often. As they dart about the house, they find their way into the wood-lined study with the black-and-white photos and the tall, graying man. And if they hover there long enough, they get a dose of Moody philosophy: Do what you can, and do it well.

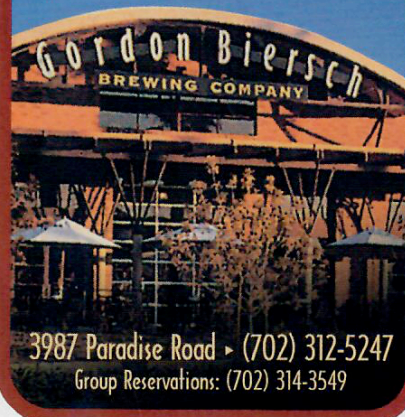
"The kids come to me and complain that the teacher did this or that," Moody says. "I say, 'Don't tell me what the teacher did. Just get what he got: an education.'"

"Even small kids in the neighborhood know Mr. Moody doesn't tolerate any bad things," Dumas says. "You don't talk about the shortcomings; you just roll with the punches. He's always said, 'Don't worry about the next fella. You don't have time to worry about what he's doing.'"

"I find myself saying that to my son." ■

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