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# Larry Mitchell

## A CALLING TO HELP OTHERS

From his own struggles to giving back, Larry Mitchell found his calling

INTERVIEW BY: *BRIAN WEST*

**L**arry Mitchell found his calling in mission work more than 20 years ago, and hasn't looked back. Raised on the east coast of Florida in a small town, Fort Pierce, Mitchell grew up during trying times in our country, but managed to rise to the top. His story is an inspiration for others as he now spends his life working to help others.

*Focus: Where are you from, originally?*

**Mitchell:** My name is Larry Mitchell. I was born in 1954 in Fort Pierce, Florida. It's a small town on the east coast of Florida.

*Focus: Tell me about your parents.*

**Mitchell:** My mother is Ruby Mitchell and my father is Willie Lee Mitchell. Both of my parents were workers. Neither graduated high school. I think both my mother and my father only have a 4th grade education. My father was from Georgia and my mother was from the Avon Park and Sebring area. My mother had a big family and my father had a fairly big family. But they were hard working people. My father worked in the fertilizer business mostly. I'd always see him on my way to school. If he wasn't on a truck, he was sitting on the front loading porch getting a nap. If he wasn't working, he was getting that mid-day nap, and I think I got that from him too. My mother was a sweet, hard working lady. In fact, she just celebrated her 80th birthday today, and still works one day out of the week at the same place she's been working for the past 40 or 50 years. She basically did housework or maid work at Shamrock Village. It's a very popular place on the east coast. She used to work for the head manager of the village for years.

*Focus: Do you have any siblings?*

**Mitchell.** Yes. I have one brother, Gerome

Mitchell. I'm one of 5 boys that lived. So you could say I was born lucky. Two of my brothers died at birth.

*Focus: Tell me about your immediate family.*

**Mitchell:** I lost my wife 9 years ago. But I have two beautiful daughters, Lace and Lark, and a granddaughter. Both of my daughters have finished their undergraduate work and are both working on their Masters Degrees.

*Focus: Tell me a little about life growing up in Fort Pierce.*

**Mitchell:** Fort Pierce was a citrus town. It's not too far from a river and the Atlantic Ocean, and that's where I learned to swim and fish. That was how I spent some of my growing up days. We also played football in the streets. We played marbles. We ran around in the mangroves and the orange groves, just playing, trying to stay out of trouble. [Laughing] I was a mischievous type person, I just never got caught. I grew up with a great family; a great Christian family. My parents raised us up fearing the Lord and just reaching outward. On Saturdays, I remember going to work with my mother. We'd play with the toys of the people she was working for, so it was like Christmas for us every Saturday. It was a lot of fun. I can even remember when I was 7 or 8 years old, one of the residents there gave me a hundred pennies. I thought I was wealthy. I thought a hundred pennies meant a hundred, hundred, hundred. It was the state of mind I was in. [Laughing] It took me a little while to realize my hundred pennies was just a dollar.

*Focus: Where did you go to high school?*

**Mitchell:** I came up in the 1970s. During that time, the country was going through a lot of change. If you remember the movie

Remember the Titans, my high school years were a lot like that. The black schools were being integrated with the white schools. There were riots around the country, the Black Panthers, just a lot of violence in the south. But as I look back on it, our country had to come to that to get where we are today. It was a crossroad. I was in the eighth grade and played quarterback for the black school. My best friend today, Cleveland Hayling, happened to be black, and also played quarterback, but he was already attending an integrated school. My school and his school merged when the built Fort Pierce Central High School for grades 9 – 12. So it became a competitive thing between the two of us, both coming to the new high school and both playing quarterback. But I must admit he was way ahead of me with his skills. Hayling turned out to be the second black quarterback recruited by the University of Florida. In fact, he was just here working with me for the past year and a half. Cleveland and I were the only two sophomores to make the team. I started as a defensive back and he was the third string quarterback. That was 1970, and as a new school, we played for the state championship that year, but lost. But we went back to the championship the following year and won. My coach reminds me that we're the only school in the state of Florida, as a new school, that went to the championship game back to back.

**Focus: I understand you just got your championships ring?**

**Mitchell:** We were awarded things, but we just didn't get rings. Our coach brought a lot of things to us as a new school. We had a new field, new equipment, new stadium; two of everything. It was a big change from when I was in 7th and 8th grade, when we got all the hand-me-downs from the white schools. We never had anything new. Sometimes you were lucky to get a uniform. And if you did, you carried that uniform home with pride. So when we got to the new school, when we came out of that locker room and ran onto that field, we were proud – the fighting Cobras. When we won the state championship, we were awarded football blankets, kind of like a commemorative blanket, and footballs. We just didn't get rings.

**Focus: Tell me about your education.**

**Mitchell:** Columbia University was interested in me. I had a 3.0 average, but that wasn't good enough for Columbia. Academics were first at Columbia. I went to Florida A&M and was accepted into their Pharmacy program. While I was there someone saw me kicking a football and asked me to try out for the team. I made the team and got a scholarship for my pharmacy degree. I graduated in 1978 and played on

the team that won the first Division I-AA Championship.

**Focus: How did you get interested in pharmacy?**

**Mitchell:** I loved chemistry.

**Focus: But that wasn't the end of your college education.**

**Mitchell:** I tried to get a job through some independents, but the jobs just weren't there. Eventually I became the first black male to get a pharmacy internship in Florida with Eckerd Drugs. After dealing with some of the customers, I realized that pharmacy just wasn't what I wanted to do. I had a friend who earned his law degree and told me I should try it. I took the LSAT and submitted my application to Southern Louisiana Law School. I graduated in 1983. Took the BAR exam, but didn't pass.

**Focus: What happened?**

**Mitchell:** I had a drug problem. This was when freebase and crack became a big thing. I realized what was going on and was able to get away from it. I struggled with it on and off, and was high the day I took the BAR. I was working in a pharmacy in 1988 when Dr. Paul Williams came in and changed my life. There was something about him that I wanted to be a part of. He was a missionary and neonatal doctor. I got involved with him and traveled for about 14 years doing faith-based medial missionary work all over the world. I've been hooked since. I came back with a passion to start a program and help others. I bought a house and then another house, and another house. We started with 3 clients and have 21 clients today.

**Focus: What is it about mission work that called you?**

**Mitchell:** It's who I am. We all try to find who we are and what our purpose is in life. You've heard my resume. When you hear that, it sounds like someone trying to get ahead in life, maybe even financially. There's nothing wrong with that, but once you achieve all that, if you don't have Christ, or you're born again; for me, I was still empty. So until I gave myself to the Lord and discovered my calling, I was lost. Once you find what you're here for, life becomes so much better.

**Focus: Tell me more about your work today.**

**Mitchell:** At New Life Outreach Ministries we have people coming to us from every kind of situation. They've been in prison. They have HIV. They suffer mentally. The rest are homeless or a combination thereof. This is a

job that is 24 hours a day, everyday. We are supported today without any federal or state dollars. We've had that support in the past, but not today.

**Focus: How do you get your funding?**

**Mitchell:** Funding today comes by finding these guys jobs, and then they pay rent. We provide them a place to live, food, counseling and classes. We have speakers that come in each week to help them and we connect with resources that help them with resumes and other skills needed to get a job.

Mitchell currently has some construction underway in one of his buildings that will provide some much needed space. This isn't your everyday story, but it's just one of the things that are right with Lakeland.

