[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay, so Saturday morning, beautiful Oakland, California, walking down the street, I get a bowl of noodles. Chillin', listening to my podcast, wander over to a nearby park. A bunch of little kids screaming and laughing and playing on the swings. I sit down on the bench. Get to work on this garlic noodles, delicious. Playground, podcast, garlic noodles, weekend. What could be better? But then, I notice a disturbance in the force. The mommies are not maybe surreptitiously moving their Chads and Monicas away from where I'm sitting. Some start tapping onto cell phones. I see them, seeing me, a large unkempt man dealing at their kids, and I'm horrified. I almost shout out, "Don't worry. Don't worry. Not to fear ladies. I am not a predator." Thankfully, my hindbrain stops this outburst. Instead, I flee top speed before the cop cars show up. And I tell you that to tell you this.

When my boy first starts in African American culture school, [unintelligible [00:01:39], the kids, they use a word for elder that I didn't grow up with. Baba. And the word 'Baba', it's Southern African, Persian, South Asians. It's a term of respect for a father-like figure, or uncle, maybe a teacher. One day, right after the first incident, I walk onto the school grounds and this beautiful little girl I had never seen before, maybe three, four years old, two big ol' afro puffs, she comes running over to me and she says, "Baba, I'm home." "What? What?" I'm teasing her. "What? Did they give you a snack?" "Yeah." "But you're still hungry?" "Yeah." "Well, let's go find you something to eat." She takes my hand in hers, and we go to get some peanut butter crackers.

Next day, she comes running up, "Baba, I hurt my leg." "Let me see. Yikes. We're going to clean that up and get you a Band-Aid." "Okay." Simple, every day nothing. And it wasn't until thinking about scrambling away from the park with my noodles that I realized how thankful I was. Thankful to have discovered a place where for a few minutes every day, I'm not perceived as a threat. Thankful for a community that insists, "I expect you to treat my child the same way you would treat your own." Thankful that when a youngster calls you "Baba," yes, they are showing respect. But they are also invoking obligation. They are saying they trust you to help them. I'm thankful. I'm so thankful I'm not scary to this little girl. And I guess I'm most thankful that she sees me the way I see me.

Today, on the Snap Judgment Gratitude Special, we hope you get to see a little bit of yourself as well. My name is Glynn Washington. Yes, the parks are for everyone. Except for you scary-looking fellas, y'all stay at home. Well, you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Snappers, just a couple of blocks from the Snap Judgment underground lair is Oakland's beautiful Lake Merritt. And this lake is our sanctuary we get to walk in every day, and it feels like Oakland's living room. And every time someone messes that up, we all feel. So, we're going to start with a story from right here in Oakland from the offices of the local newspaper from the time Tammerlin Drummond was a reporter for the East Bay Times.

[Snap Judgment]

[pensive music]

**Tammerlin:** I was sitting at my desk at my office in Downtown Oakland. My editor walks over and says, "Do you know somebody named Willie?" I said, "Willie?" She said, "Yeah, this guy named Willie. He used to be a salesman up at Lake Merritt." And I said, "No, no, I don't know him." She said, "Well, he apparently died, there's this big memorial that people have erected to him up at the lake. Can you go with the photographer and check it out?" So, I jumped in my car and went up to the lake and I saw all of these pictures of Willie who was this African American man. I figured maybe he was, I don't know, 60-ish, Kind of scraggly beard. And I realized this is the guy that I used to see when I was walking the lake but I had never actually spoken to him, but I remembered him.

**Adizah:** Willie was a fixture at the lake. All the regulars knew his name, and he was always there, underneath some arches, across from the Catholic church down at the lake south end.

**Tammerlin:** I mean, he was like meticulous. I mean, he was like a decorator. And he would lay out this little blanket, and he would arrange his wares just so and you could buy shoes, he would have jewelry, different little bracelets. I mean, all kinds. You just never knew what he was going to have there. He really was like the greeter of Lake Merritt. That was one of the things that made him so popular.

**Rico:** My man, Willie, the hustler, is my partner. That’s my partner.

**Adizah:** This is Rico. He rides a bike with a huge speaker box attached to the front. Every day for four years, Rico would ride his bike with the oldies blasting from his speakers and meet up with Willie for lunch.

**Rico:** I usually come about, oh, 12:30, 1:00. I would go over there and have my grapes and cheeses, yeah, mix that together and my salads that I buy from Safeway, and I use the brand Willie want.

**Adizah:** After lunch, they would sit out for the rest of the day listening to music and clapping along. It's what they were doing the night before Willie disappeared.

**Rico:** I left at 6 o'clock like I always do. I said, "Man, I'll see you tomorrow afternoon by 1 o'clock if God spared my life." He said, "All right, Ric, all right." So next day, I came back by 2 o'clock, and no Willie.

**Adizah:** Rico thought about all the places Willie could be.

**Rico:** The day before, he had some itching on his skin, and it kept itching. I said, "Man, you've got to go to the doctor." About 1 o'clock, Richard came through, the buddy, he came through with poodles and he had tears in his eyes, "Have you seen Willie?"

**Adizah:** Poodle?

**Richard:** Yeah, she is a poodle.

**Adizah:** This is Richard with the poodle.

**Richard:** I know his schedule. [chuckles] The only time he would be gone is when he was sick and had to go to the doctor. I had this bad feeling, I thought, "Oh, no, he probably just, you know--" And then, the second day I said, "Holy." And then, the third day was just like, "Do you know Willie he really is?" "No, I don't know. I don't know."

**Rico:** Everybody camping out. Now people come out of the woodwork. Some people I had never even seen before. People with tears in their eyes. "Where's Willie? Have you seen Willie?"

**Adizah:** One of those people was Anna Leigh Allen.

**Anna.** Yeah, good morning.

**Adizah:** She used to stop by and chat with Willie every Friday morning with her walking group. And when they noticed Willie was gone--

**Anna:** Well, what happened was after a couple of weeks, one of the people in our group brought a poster out and some flowers and set up a little memorial to him. Kind of memorial pictures to Willie and different comments, "Willie, we miss you." I hadn't been walking that long, but I knew that he was a stay on hold here for people. [chuckles] You always thought about Willie when you went by.

**Adizah:** Pretty soon, more people added posters and flowers, and Willie's memorial just kept growing. By the time Tammerlin got there, all kinds of stuff was spilling out from Willie's corner at the lake.

**Tammerlin:** People have left teddy bears and they've left pictures of Willie posing with their poodles, and people have written these elaborate poems and "RIP Willie," and "Willie, the Lake Merritt Ambassador. We miss you." "Go with the ancestors."

**Richard:** There were just all these urban rumors. There's no way. There's no way he could be dead.

[background music]

**Female Speaker:** Hey, Willie. We miss you already. We wish you were here but we know you're now at a much better place.

**Male Speaker:** Willie is like the spirit of this beautiful temple called Lake Merritt.

[background music]

**Tammerlin:** All these people were so worked up over this guy, and most of them didn't even know his name. The ones who knew his name only knew him by Willie. And one young woman actually said to me, she said, "Willie was kind of a sign of familiarity in Oakland," which people are very nervous about gentrification and all these things that are changing.

**Adizah:** As Tammerlin moved through the crowd interviewing Willie's mourners, she heard stories and saw all kinds of photos of him. And people, they could tell her what they remembered about Willie, but no one could tell her what exactly happened to Willie.

**Tammerlin:** This was something that was sort of nagging in the back of my mind as a journalist.

**Adizah:** Tammerlin got in her car and headed back to the office to do some investigating. First, she reached out to the coroner to see if they had a body that fit Willie's description. African American male, somewhere between 5'5" and 5'8" with a salt and pepper beard.

**Tammerlin:** And they didn't have a body. The police didn't have any kind of police report. And so, I thought, "Well."

**Adizah:** Tammerlin's deadline was fast approaching but she still was at square one. She didn't know what happened to Willie. And she didn't even know his last name. So, she decided to write everything she knew. The headline of her article read, "Death of Lake Merritt Mystery Man causes an unusual outpouring." The paper ran the story the next morning, and when Tammerlin got to work, she had a new voicemail.

**Tammerlin:** And it's from this lady named Pamela Turner.

**Adizah:** Pamela said she knew what happened to Willie. She left her number for Tammerlin.

**Tammerlin:** This could be finally the break in the case as to like what's happened to Willie. So, I was like, "Well, I got to get to this woman right away." I mean, I was super excited. So, I immediately call her.

**Pamela:** I was actually driving to work that morning.

**Adizah:** Around 5:00 in the morning, Pamela Turner was driving on Lakeshore Avenue, when all of a sudden, she saw a woman approaching her car, waving her hands and trying to get her attention. So, Pamela slowed down to see what was going on.

**Pamela:** And I saw a man lying on the ground. Something just told me to pull over. So, I pulled over and I asked, I said, "Ma'am, are you okay?" She said, "I think this guy needs help."

**Adizah:** The woman heard someone calling for help from her apartment. When she looked out the window, she saw a man with his arms around Willie's neck, putting him down. Another one had his bike. They were robbing him. The woman ran downstairs and found Willie, all alone on the ground.

**Pamela:** I went up to him and I said, "Are you okay, sir?" And he really couldn't speak. He was just pointing towards his throat. And he was like, "I can't breathe. It's hard for me to breathe. It felt like I'm passing out, I can't breathe." And he was like, "Don't leave me, just don't leave me."

**Adizah:** Pamela called 911. The dispatcher told her to lay him down on his side.

**Pamela:** But when he laid down on his side, it seemed like he got worse. He started really gasping for air, and then he was almost hitting his chest. And then, his eyes start rolling in his head, and then everything just went quiet, silent. And I was like, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God." And she looked at me, she said, "Did he die? Did we lose him?" And I was going, "Sir, sir, sir?" And then, we were like touching him and shaking him. And then, foam started coming out of his mouth. By this time, it's like 5:30 in the morning. It's freezing cold out. So, we both took our jackets off to cover him because he didn't have on anything and he was probably like 120 pounds.

**Adizah:** Pamela and the other woman waited for the paramedics to arrive. They watched as they whisked him into the ambulance and after the hospital. Still shaken, Pamela made her way to work and on her lunch break, she snuck away to the bathroom to call the county hospital. They wouldn't share any information about the man's condition. She wasn't family. But still, Pamela called the hospital every day. A month went by. That's when Pamela read Tammerlin's article. She recognized the picture of Willie and decided she had to reach out. At that point, Tammerlin still didn't know Willie's last name, and Pamela was the one who gave it to her.

**Tammerlin:** Finally, Willie Ellis. I said, "It cannot possibly be that this man is still alive after all this time, and these people think that he's dead."

**Adizah:** Tammerlin made some phone calls, and she managed to track Willie down pretty fast. The county moved him outside of Oakland to a hospital that provided therapy and nursing care. Once she got an address, she hopped in her car and drove over there.

**Tammerlin:** So, my heart at this point is going boom, boom. "Calm down. I'm almost there. I'm almost there." And then, I start walking down the hallways and as I'm approaching what I think is the room where they told me Willie Ellis is. There's a woman nurse sitting right outside the door, and she's on one of those computers that they're typing in. As I approach, I kind of peer in, and then all of a sudden, I catch a glimpse, like a quick glimpse of this man in this hospital coat. And I look and I can see from the hair, the kind of scraggly fro and it's kind of salt and pepper, slight little guy, I'm like, "That is Willie."

I of sidle up to the bed and pull up a chair and sit down. I said, "Hi, Willie. I'm Tammerlin Drummond. I'm a reporter with the East Bay Times. I am so surprised to find you here. Everybody thinks you're dead." And I pulled out my phone because I had taken some pictures from the memorial and I started showing him the pictures of the poems and the flowers and all these things, and he just burst into tears.

**Adizah:** The man who Tammerlin saw in the hospital bed that afternoon seemed far from the charming salesman who she remembered at the lake. It was Willie, but the injuries from the robbery were bad. He suffered from shaking spells that lasted for days on end.

**Tammerlin:** I just felt so terrible for the poor thing, and I was just trying to rub his back and hug him and he just kept bawling and bawling and bawling.

**Adizah:** Willie's cellphone and laptop were stolen in the robbery. He couldn't get a hold of Richard or Rico or anyone to let them know where he was. He was helpless. So, after her visit, Tammerlin rushed back to the office and posted a quick article online.

**Tammerlin:** "Oakland mystery: Lake Merritt's Willie not dead but recovering from brutal assault. For the last several weeks, people have been coming to Lake Merritt in droves, leaving touching tributes to a mystery street salesman who was a longtime fixture at Lake Merritt."

**Willie:** And whoever put that on the wall, they were right. I died twice and I came back.

**Adizah:** Here's Willie from the hospital.

**Willie:** When I first got here, I couldn’t walk at all. They used to come, get me out of bed, put me in my wheelchair and put me up on bars. I couldn't hold myself up.

**Adizah:** When Willie was on those bars in physical therapy, he would think about Richard and Rico and getting back to the lake. That was his motivation. And as soon as they read Tammerlin's article, Richard and Rico rushed to see Willie. A few weeks later, Richard checked Willie out of the hospital for the day. He folded Willie's wheelchair into his compact SUV and brought him to his old spot at the lake. Everyone was happy to see him.

**Female Speaker:** Good. What, you gained weight? You look so handsome. Yes, yes. [crosstalk] Oh, you look like a million dollar now.

**Willie:** [laughs]

**Female Speaker:** Whoa, look at your arms, boy. How you doing?

**Willie:** I'm doing fine. Thanks a lot.

**Richard:** Getting too much loving over here. Fat, juicy.

**Willie:** [laughs]

**Male Speaker:** How you doing, Will? What's up, boy? You get them beans?

**Willie:** Doctor got me on a diet now. Eating all that sugar is dangerous, no soda.

**Richard:** How many friends can you just know they're going to be there? And just there's no expectation, you just show up. You don't even have to go into a house. His house is right there, every day. And he listens to a lot of people, kind of like church, I guess. The Church of Willie. I guess I had a dream when I found him that he would somehow someday be back up there, but it ain't going to happen. I know he's going to get old anyway, but he's too injured right now.

**Adizah:** Richard helped Willie get a hold of his social security numbers so that he could receive government benefits. Someone else set up a GoFundMe. His church bought him clothes/ And Rico would bring him a plate of soul food at the hospital when he could.

**Rico:** Letting my hopes away that Willie does what he wants to do. When I hear he's living outside, I don't know and am still not going to ask. He's comfortable for doing what he does. As long as he is comfortable, I'm comfortable. I ask him no more questions.

**Tammerlin:** Why not are you asking questions?

**Rico:** Well, we've known each other for seven years. Why should I start changing up right now talking about, "Hey, man, who is you, man? Where you from?" Everything else, he got covered. He's a hustler. And he can't wait to get back in business, but he needs a little bit more work now.

**Tammerlin:** People were so touched by the loss of this guy that they never even knew. I wondered why did they feel this level of caring for this person. But yet, the homeless person who's out collecting cans, people just like walk by and they just consider them to be like a scourge on society. But that Willie was no different from the person who was collecting the cans. Their circumstances are very similar.

What would you say is the biggest difference between your life before you were in the hospital was compared to now?

**Willie:** It's like hell now. My life was good, better than good.

**Adizah:** It's been two years since the robbery, and since Willie disappeared from his corner at the lake. He's still at the hospital where Tammerlin found him.

**Willie:** They used to tell me, "You can't move or walk. You'll just sit in that wheelchair," for the rest of my life. I told them, "I want to walk."

**Tammerlin:** And how many months did it take you to walk?

**Willie:** Took me about nine months. They all told me, "You've got a strong determination."

**Adizah:** Willie's balance is good, but still shaky. He walks the perimeter of the hospital most mornings, unsure when he'll leave or where he's going next.

Do you think you'll ever sell again? Sell antiques and trinkets over there again?

**Willie:** Yeah, I think I will be able to once I get this shaking under control and get the right type of medicine. I can do it now. I just have my shaking problem.

[soulful music]

**Glynn:** Big thanks to Tammerlin Drummond who has reported for the East Bay Times. A special shoutout as well to Pamela Turner, Rico Garcia, Richard Bell, Anna Leigh Allen, and the Friday walking group. Thanks as well to Willie Ellis, rest in power. Original score for this piece was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Adizah Eghan.

[upbeat music]

Don't go anywhere, Snappers. After the break, more on Willie. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Gratitude Special. Everyone knows that Willie Ellis was the unofficial mayor and greeter of Lake Merritt. And our entire community mourns the fact that Willie Ellis passed away, June 22nd, 2022. We sent our Snap producer, Bo Walsh, to his memorial by Lake Merritt to get stories from just some of those who loved him.

[blues playing]

**Male Speaker:** This is Willie's post. Willie, he's been around this lake around different places, but he settled here, this was the last place that he actually just settled and made his daily space.

**Female Speaker:** Willie was like an oak tree. He was solid and coming here every day. We walked the lake three days a week. So, it was always nice to come around the bend and see him setting up.

**Male Speaker:** We were kicking it every morning for almost a year. But yeah, he knew every man woman and child and pet. That's why they call him the mayor, everybody loved him. Everybody from young people to dogs to the super OGs, all were, "Hey, Mr. Willie." They all had mad respect for him. The Mayor, the straight mayor.

**Male Speaker:** Willie, to me, he was the mayor. He's just a great guy. He just exemplifies the spirit of Oakland. Since I came here from Belfast, he's always been my friend.

**Male Speaker:** Every morning, I would come, see if he's okay, see if he needed anything. Sit down, chat with him for about 30 minutes.

**Female Speaker:** He's a wonderful man, just gave me so much. He was always like an anchor. [unintelligible [00:27:27] come back and, "I got to get to the lake. I've got to see Willie so I know everything is okay."

**Female Speaker:** The fondest memory is I gave Willie a Valentine card one year, and several days later, he brought me an anniversary card. And on it, he said, "You're my very best friend, forever and always." And I brought him breakfast every day, chicken noodle soup and oatmeal. He started to leave me joints. [chuckles] I hurt my back. And so, he felt like it was like his way of repaying me. He told me I needed to smoke them to get through the pain. So, when he passed away, somebody found his suitcase and that Valentine card was still in it. And I still have his as well. So, we just looked out for each other.

**Shirley:** And he would always, always say, "Thank you, Mama." And then one day, I said, "Willie, you know you call me mama. But do you remember my name?" He looked at me and said, "You're Shirley."

[laughter]

**Male Speaker:** Before he closes up shop, I end up coming by telling him, "Have a good day. Have a blessed day and see you tomorrow."

**Male Speaker:** Willie, when I spoke to him every morning, he said, "God gave me another day."

[applause]

**Male Speaker:** I don't know if you guys spoke to him, but he said that to me consistently.

**Male Speaker:** I always made my way to see him again. And then one day, he didn't show up. I went and checked his tent over there underneath the freeway, and he wasn't there. And I said, "Something has befallen him." And that's why I'm still here, because I'm still kind of praying.

**Male Speaker:** Willie, I still give him props even though he's not physically here, that's tight. This is a testament to the man he was because if he was just-- nobody that would just walk by but people come, bring shit and they're like, take a moment. He affected all these people's lives. He was just him.

**Female Speaker:** He wasn't looking to start some kind of movement, but really that's kind of what it's turning into. Absolutely. Remember Willie Ellis.

**Male Speaker:** Willie was just a real down to earth person. He really was. I love Willie like a brother. And I know that there's a lot of people that's going to miss him.

**Male Speaker:** Williewas an angel here on earth, and he touched me about 20 years ago. I'm a better person for it. His spirit will live on forever and I will hold him very dear in my heart.

**Male Speaker:** So, God bless you, brother Willie Ellis, from your friend Shawn at the lake. Peace out brother Willie. One love from Shawn. Peace.

**Crowd:** Willie, Willie, Willie.

[applause]

**Male Speaker:** Go in the spirit of Willie. Thank you.

[pensive music]

**Glynn:** Rest in power, Willie Ellis. Thanks to Snap producer, Bo Walsh, for capturing the love.

[upbeat music]

Now, I just want to say I am so thankful for the storytellers, for you listeners, for the entire community that shows up and gives us so much love. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. All of us at Snap are sending you love right back.

[upbeat music]

Snap is brought to you by the team that has largely abandoned the notion of the traditional turkey. I think they're eating sprout and berries. Except for the producer, Mr. Mark Ristich, he wants white meat and dark meat, please. And gravy on his gravy. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Bo Walsh, Annie Nguyen, Zahra Noorbakhsh.

But please know that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could sneak off the icebox at 3:00 in the morning to fix up a leftover sandwich, only to discover there aren't any more leftovers left over. And before you sound the alarm, you might just notice all the crumbs running down the front of your pajamas, sparking a big recollection about a 1:00 AM leftover plate with all the fixings that you might have eaten up already. And even then, even then your triple-helping-having self would still not be as far away from the news as this. But this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*