

They built foundations, towers, substations, and strung conductors to serve Californians. Power, that's what this great line is all about.

My name is Willie F. Warren. I worked for PG&E for 35 years.

I can remember seeing in a vision of you having these on your legs when I was little.

Bare handling 500,000 volts. You can hear the humming of the line when you go to touch it. As far as I know, I was the first Black journeyman lineman for PG&E.

Defying every challenge of mother nature, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company construction men are asked to do the impossible and to do it yesterday.

[BIRDS CHIRPING]

I don't know, dad, where that picture is. Let me look one more time under here. I don't know. And you said it was the picture of the KV line?

We're bare handling the 500,000 volt line.

When I was little, I used to say my dad climbs poles. And I would point to the poles.

These men are getting ready to go out on the job in the pre-dawn hours.

We have a reverence for PG&E. Like, when I see a PG&E truck, I always look. When I see a power pole, I look at the KV lines. I look the transformers. We have a knowledge that most of the people would not have.

Especially women.

Yes, exactly. My dad very much bleeds PG&E.

Look at that, dad. Wow.

This is in the driveway of the first house my mom and dad owned. I don't know if you were working overtime or you'd stopped home, I can't remember.

Were you a groundsman then driving that truck?

Troubleman. He makes first call to anybody that's out of power. If the wire running to your house is burnt or loose, troubleman would go out there, find out there's no power or half power. And he would fix that item. Well, at that time, I was about 5-foot, 10 inches, and I weighed about 130 pounds.

Doing high voltage work as a line crew, you got to keep your mind concentrated on what you're doing. You have to do this work in very lots of times inclement weather. It could be a wind storm. It could be a rainstorm. And we've even worked in the snow.

I was born in Oklahoma, a little town called Tryon. My father, he left home and came to California. My mom and dad sent for us. And I remember at that time, he was living in an old boxcar that was on a side rail. And that's where we stayed inside this boxcar for about a year.

His past has led him along the path. He never said it. But if his grandparents could come out here and farm and pick cotton and do all those things and rise above that, why couldn't he? He wanted more. So he shot for the moon.

Lincoln Elementary Junior High School, East Bakersfield. Pretty segregated town at that time.

Bakersfield in the early '70s was all white up here. And so we were the only other Black family on our block.

Most of the white lived on the West Side of Highway 99, and the Blacks lived on the East Side of 99.

I remember him telling stories of coming home and being called derogatory names and him telling my mom. I would stand in the kitchen and I could hear him telling my mom things. And no one really wanted to report to an African American man that had authority. So I remember that that was always a challenge for him. And he was able to-- he was able to overcome them.

He was the ambitious one. He was the one who saw opportunities. And there were doors closed. And he would just push through the doors. And he was basically a trailblazer. What are these?

This leather piece is to cover up the spikes.

Oh. So now the spikes are the part that--

You put it in the pole.

Right. And climb up the pole.

On your foot.

I've closed my eyes because I can remember seeing in a vision of you having these on your legs when I was little.

They haven't been used in a long time.

[LAUGHS]

Just with what you'd be wearing, you've got about 25 pounds added onto you. And then you fill your pouch up with your tools-- crescent wrench, pliers. It's no real joke just climbing a pole.

So you have this on, those on. Wow. This is very heavy.

Yeah.

I never knew how heavy this is. And you did this day in and day out?

Yes.

And it's 110 degrees outside. I think it's been kind of cool to hear him and watch dad in his whole element, and really share and give you what he knows. Because they say when folks go, it goes with them.

And then also recognizing that your parent is not just your parent. He was once a little boy, and then he was a teenager, and then he was a young man. So we often forget that our parents are people, too.

I got it. I'm learning. Oh, like that. OK. So you're the pole.

I'm the pole.

Oh. Got it.

Lean back.

When he started PG&E, there were no Black people. There were like handfuls. Now, there's a rainbow of folks. I see them in the trucks. I'm thinking my dad and the few people that came behind him made it possible for you to be here. It's finding a goal, seeing it through. However long it takes you, but to just persevere. Dad was the one who kind of pushed through for you to have that opportunity.

[SOFT MUSIC]