

*Kerwin Holmes:* Hello. My name is Kerwin Holmes Junior.

*Allison Henry:* My name is Allison Henry.

*Kerwin Holmes:* On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom and the Center of \_\_\_\_\_  
Forming Communities we'd like to thank you for sharing your  
story with us today.

*Darlene Williamson:* You're welcome.

*Kerwin Holmes:* First I'd like to start with a few basic questions. Could you please  
give us your name?

*Darlene Williamson:* I'm Darlene Baker Williamson.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Could you tell us what year you were born?

*Darlene Williamson:* I was born in 1951.

*Kerwin Holmes:* \_\_\_\_\_ your childhood where you were born  
and raised.

*Darlene Williamson:* I was actually born here in Memphis, Tennessee and grew up in  
the Highland Heights area. Went to Grahamwood Elementary  
School till 1963 and then went to Treadwell in 1963 and graduated  
in 1969. I attended here at Highland Heights United Methodist  
Church the entire time.

*Allison Henry:* Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

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*Darlene Williamson:* The neighborhood I grew up in was a very close knit community.  
We all knew each other. We all played outside, whether it was  
hide and go seek or jacks or Tarzan. We played all kinds of fun  
games outside and enjoyed each other and went to school together.

*Kerwin Holmes:* What grades did you go to Treadwell?

*Darlene Williamson:* I went 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So who was the principal? Was it Mabry?

*Darlene Williamson:* Mr. Mabry was our principal. Actually my senior year he retired at  
our graduation. So our graduation was his retirement ceremony

with E.C. **Stenbord**, our superintendent, giving his farewell retirement speech to him.

*Kerwin Holmes:* What year did you graduate?

*Darlene Williamson:* 1969.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So, could you tell us just a little bit of how it was graduating in the year 1969? A lot of stuff historically happened.

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*Darlene Williamson:* A lot of stuff was happening. Vietnam War was very prevalent at that time. All of the males were getting their draft numbers. We were all very concerned about that. We were all very concerned about going off to college and leaving our childhood friends and going on and pursuing other things. So it was a different time, a different step for us, just like it is for every graduate I'm sure.

But 1968, the night that Martin Luther King was killed, many things changed for us with having our curfews and all of our dates were in the daytime. We couldn't go out at night and things like that.

So things did change and we knew that life was going to be different not only because we were graduating, but because –

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-- other circumstances had happened around the country.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So graduating from Treadwell High School, did it leave with you a sense of your future was ahead of you or did the \_\_\_\_\_ annul that?

*Darlene Williamson:* Oh no, no, no. Still everything was great. We had such wonderful teachers and we were well prepared to go on and to deal with whatever was going on.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So, were you here when the Treadwell High School was integrated?

*Darlene Williamson:* Yes. Now my senior class was not, but we had students in the junior and sophomore and freshmen classes. So yes. I was in the band and the band was integrated. We had students there and they were fantastic.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Were there any sort of misgivings that you had before or prior to –

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-- integration that gave way afterwards or were there any difficulties seen in the institution itself?

*Darlene Williamson:* I did not. I had grown up with a family that taught us that everyone was loved, everyone was a child of God. I had been with other people of many races so it didn't affect me in any way like that.

I know that some of the parents did have a fear of change.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So it was more so with the parents than it was with the students.

*Darlene Williamson:* Yes. Because that change when you're an adult is a lot harder than it is when you're a child so yeah. That was my perception anyway.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Can you tell us about living in the Highland Heights area just a –

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-- little bit more? You said you went out and played out in the open. You played Tarzan and jacks and things like that.

*Darlene Williamson:* Cowboys and Indians, kick the can, all the fun games. We would go to Treadwell and play in the playground area. We would go to **Gosman** Park. We would come over to Bristol Theater on Summer Avenue and go to the show. We would walk or ride our bikes anywhere in the neighborhood we wanted to.

We had some little stores close by where the YMCA was, which is now the Boys' Club. We had the Randolph Library. We went there all the time. We went there to get cool, too. They had air conditioning at the library and, of course, at the Bristol Theater. So we would go there to get cool, but we'd check out books. We'd read.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So basically the community seems like it was very close knit and it was centered around the school, Treadwell.

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*Darlene Williamson:* Yes, it was centered around Treadwell and it was centered around the library and the churches because we had vacation Bible schools

at the different churches and, of course, had many of them. So, some kids went to many vacation Bible schools during the summer.

*Allison Henry:* What role did religion play in your life growing up?

*Darlene Williamson:* Ah, religion was a big part of my life. I was always here before the doors opened. I was probably one of the last people to leave. This church, Highland Heights United Methodist, was a big part of that in that we came here for recreation, we came here to have vacation Bible school or Christian adventure weeks so that we studied Bible studies and we had fellowship and recreation together.

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We went to camps. We went to the Kentucky Lake area. We went to Lake Junaluska in North Carolina to meet people from all over the country.

So religion was a big part here. It's where I think a lot of who I am started.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Was there a big community of young people went to church at this time?

*Darlene Williamson:* Oh yes. For NYF to have 100 people was not unusual or the United Methodist Youth. We had the juniors. We had the junior high and then we had the seniors. For there to be 100 to 150 on Sunday night for those 3 groups and then Sunday school. There were many Sunday schools on Sunday morning

*Kerwin Holmes:* So I guess when the school wasn't doing anything the church took over for you guys and your activities as a \_\_\_\_\_ --

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*Darlene Williamson:* Even when school was going on. The other churches also. Highland Heights Baptist had things going on. You invited your friends here. They invited you there to do whatever was going on.

The Highland Heights Presbyterian was then in the neighborhood also. So we did a lot of things together as a church group, as well as youth. We had services together some.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Oh, just youth services?

*Darlene Williamson:* We had the whole church services, like for Thanksgiving and Easter time and different things like that. We would have services together so that we got to know each other. Not only at school, but at churches.

*Allison Henry:* How has the church changed since its childhood?

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, it has changed in, one, is the numbers. The numbers of people who are coming, the numbers of people who are –

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-- members. It has also changed in color. We have people from different countries. We have African-Americans and we don't have as many youth and don't have as many children, but we still have some.

*Kerwin Holmes:* We already asked you how has your church changed. How do you think Treadwell High School and our middle school has changed?

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, mostly being African-American instead of being mostly Caucasian. It has changed that way. Of course, there is no longer the high school, which was a very sad time for me. That was hard for me. It felt like something was taken from me. It was part of my life was gone, but going over there and seeing kids, going over there and talking to the teachers, they're very much the same. –

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-- They're kids. They're students. Many of them are there. They want to learn so much.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Is there anything you do now in the community to help Treadwell students or give back to the Highland Heights community?

*Darlene Williamson:* One of the things that we've done since 1997 that I've been in charge of is for the elementary school is doing school supplies and furnishing the school supplies for students who need them hoping that they would go to school the first day. Hoping that that way that they wouldn't have an excuse for not registering because the school year was starting earlier and earlier, as we know. Now the 5<sup>th</sup> of August this year.

So parents sometimes were not used to that and didn't budget for it and things. So that's one of the main things that I have done. Then I've done some proctoring over there.

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*Kerwin Holmes:* Are there any sort of changes that you see from your work you've been doing at the school that have been helping students cope with the changes in the neighborhood surrounding school?

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, I don't know specifically, but I hope it has. I hope by the walks we take in the community and speak to people and pray for the community and the school supplies, whether they know where they came from or not, I'm hoping that they know someone loves them and someone cares, that they do well and learn.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So with the Highland Heights church community it still has not left Treadwell it seems.

*Darlene Williamson:* No.

*Kerwin Holmes:* It's pushing forward.

*Darlene Williamson:* Yes.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Do you remember, just going into historical events, do you remember the white flight that took place in Memphis around the 70s?

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*Darlene Williamson:* I was not in Memphis. I was at college, but I did hear about it. I did have friends who were teaching in non-accredited schools. I had never heard of such, of a non-accredited school. Why would you want to go to one and why would you want to teach in one, but I knew it was happening because of that.

Then shortly thereafter moved out of the country for three years. So, I was not actually here when a lot of the busing started and a lot of the white flight took place.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Did the stories have any effect on you? Just the images you had looking back at home?

*Darlene Williamson:* I was very disappointed. Very disappointed. It made me sad –

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-- that friends, people would have any kind of hatred or any kind of fear that would cause it to happen. I wasn't happen. It didn't make me happy.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So going to a little thing you said, you said you left the country for a little while. Can you explain what all that was?

*Darlene Williamson:* I got married and my husband was in the Army. So he was stationed in Erlangen, Germany. So we moved to Germany.

*Kerwin Holmes:* How was it there?

*Darlene Williamson:* Prejudice was very rampant at the time. Vietnam War had just ended. Drugs were rampant. It was a different time there, too. They were experiencing a lot of differences in Europe at the time. We had a commander that I was so happy to say that when a –

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-- sign was put up by any organization that said, "No Blacks Allowed", he would go to the organization and he would say, "Then no Whites, any American is welcome." So he was trying to make a difference and make a statement there, too.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So, of course, by then the Army had been desegregated.

*Darlene Williamson:* Oh, definitely. Definitely.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Sort of enforcing those federal laws across seas.

*Darlene Williamson:* Exactly.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Prejudice will follow us anywhere I guess.

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, and to tell a story, one of my friends, one of my German friends married an American soldier. She asked me one day why her parents would have said, their first question when she said she was dating an American, "Is he Black?" She said, "Why would they have said that?" I said, "Well, it's a difference. Your parents haven't grown up yet with these changes in these parts."

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Again, change is just so hard for an older generation. NO matter what the change is. It is very difficult most of the time.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Who played a big role in your life?

*Darlene Williamson:* Who played a big role in my life? My parents. My church.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Could you elaborate on that about how they played a big role in your life? Anything that stands out. We know that they probably raised you.

*Darlene Williamson:* Yeah. One, bringing me to church, making certain I was here and living the lives that they lived. I believe you've interviewed my mother and maybe my father also, but again, that they were not prejudiced in any way. They taught me that everyone was equal. –

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-- If I said a derogatory thing about anyone, it came back. "Well now think about what you just said."

*Kerwin Holmes:* Were you accountable with what you said?

*Darlene Williamson:* Ooh, I was accountable. Oh yeah, I was always told, "If you get a spanking at school you'll get one at home when you get back. Don't worry about it."

*Kerwin Holmes:* That's cool. I got raised a little bit like that myself.

*Darlene Williamson:* Alright. The fear of the paddle.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Yes, ma'am.

*Darlene Williamson:* But I think giving us choices and I think letting us explore and be and be friends with others and having that opportunity.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So they just guided you. They weren't very restrictive of who you were hanging with according to how they feel.

*Darlene Williamson:* Right. Oh, no.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So it was instruction going on at the home and also at school and at church.

*Darlene Williamson:* Mm-hmm. Exactly.

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*Kerwin Holmes:* So it was a lifelong lesson –

*Darlene Williamson:* Lifelong lesson and, again, the neighborhood and getting to be there.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So would you say that in the current condition of the neighborhood, would you say that in any of those things, the lifelong lesson at home, at school or at church, do you think any of those things are being deficient in their job in the neighborhood today?

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, I don't know. I would think you would have to ask some of them about that. There probably are some deficiencies, but again, parents teach their children and instruct their children in other ways than maybe I was.

Maybe the paddling isn't for them as it was for my parents' generation. Maybe they're guiding them in a different way, a –

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-- more positive way instead of **not** sparing the rod.

*Kerwin Holmes:* The fear of the Board of Education.

*Darlene Williamson:* Yes.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So could you say that just the different methods of teaching their kids, at least they're teaching their kids.

*Darlene Williamson:* If they are. If they're teaching them the respect and the love and if they're giving them the love and unconditionally.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So this is going back to Treadwell High School. I think we just wanna really capture how it was for you growing up. How was it just having Mabry as principal 'cause you say he retired when you graduated? He had been the principal there for about 30 years for some years. So how was it having this man as the boss of your school?

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, we had the respect for him because he had been there so –

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-- long and because he had seen so many changes.

When I was I think a junior, there was a truck that would come around lunchtime and park like it was going to be an ice cream truck. Some of the kids would eat outside instead of eating in the cafeteria.

One day he walked out to see what the truck was all about and yes, they were selling drugs. So, he made certain that that truck never returned to our campus. So he tried to stay on top of things. He tried to make certain we were safe and understood what was going on.

*Kerwin Holmes:* So he was sort of like a second dad I guess.

*Darlene Williamson:* Oh yeah.

*Kerwin Holmes:* 'Cause we heard some people speak. They said they looked up to him and he was like a father figure to them.

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*Darlene Williamson:* Yeah, he was. He attended the ballgames. He let us have the pep rallies and was there with us. His story to us as a group I was in was when he – we wanted to know his history. So we asked him about coming to Treadwell. He said he went to an Alabama football game right before we were to choose the colors. He said the Alabama football team had on new uniforms. Bright scarlet red and white.

It had been rumored that our colors were gonna be plaid. Plaid. Because we were the Highlands. So it was going to go after the Scotland tradition. That was the rumor he said that was going around.

So when he saw that he said, “No. Treadwell will have red and white. Scarlet and white.”

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*Kerwin Holmes:* Thankfully he said.

*Darlene Williamson:* Thankfully. Yeah, we were proud of our red and white and our eagle.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Soar to new heights. Has that always been the motto for Highland Heights?

*Darlene Williamson:* Soaring to new heights?

*Kerwin Holmes:* Treadwell's?

*Darlene Williamson:* I think that was probably brought in a little bit later. I don't know that we really had a motto so much when I was growing up.

*Kerwin Holmes:* What to you is the most important thing to instruct say a middle schooler who's going through Treadwell? What's the most important thing to tell him in life? Just something they can always rely on.

*Darlene Williamson:* Have respect for yourself and have respect for others and do your best, but to always respect.

*Kerwin Holmes:* That's like the most important life lesson.

*Darlene Williamson:* Mm-hmm.

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*Kerwin Holmes:* Well, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your travel experience, your Highland Heights experience that you have in your heart that you just don't think we covered yet?

*Darlene Williamson:* Well, to give you probably some of the history that you've already heard, but my senior year, we won the state championship in baseball.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Oh, okay.

*Darlene Williamson:* So, go to college and meet some people from the team that lost. So we had a good time with that while we were in college. Of course our basketball teams were always well renowned across the state and our band was the pride of the south. We traveled all over the country playing and opening the World's Fair in 1984, Orange –

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-- Bowl, Cotton Bowl, Rose Bowl, just the different places that we got to go and the experience.

So the experiences that we had, the experiences that the teachers, Mr. Mabry, allowed us to have were very important.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Well we'd like to thank you for taking your time here to give your story.

*Darlene Williamson:* Well thank you. Thank you for taking the time to put together some of the stories and to put together some of the history of the neighborhood because it is a very vital part of Memphis.

*Kerwin Holmes:* Yes, ma'am.

*[End of Audio]*