

Prince Williams: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and the Corners of Highland Heights, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I am Prince Williams.

Allison Henry: I'm Allison Henry.

Prince Williams: And I'm honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today is July 2, 2014 and we are located at the Highland Heights Methodist Church. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. To start with some biographical information, what is your name?

James D. Pearson Jr.: My name is James Denton Pearson, Jr.

Prince Williams: What year were you born?

James D. Pearson Jr.: 1956.

Prince Williams: Where were you born and raised?

James D. Pearson Jr.: I was born and raised in Cleveland, Mississippi and lived there until 1974, graduated from high school in 1974. Went to the University of Mississippi, finished there in 1978.

Allison Henry: What brought you to Memphis?

James D. Pearson Jr.: A new job, it was –

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1995; I moved from upstate New York where I had resided briefly, for about a year and a half to two years back to the mid-South, went to work for **Servamatic** Midland Food Services, a vending and food service company.

Prince Williams: When you were done working with the food service company, what did you do next?

James D. Pearson Jr.: I had a variety of jobs, let's see, after Servamatic Midland Food Services I worked for a consolidator within the printing company, I did that for several years but then that company was, declared bankruptcy. Was a consultant for a period of time and then went to work for my work as a Director of Ministries, did that for about, let's see, about four years –

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from 2004 to 2008. Then had an opportunity to go to work for the Collegiate School of Memphis; that's what brought me to the Highland Heights neighborhood, I was director of operations or the business manager for the Collegiate School of Memphis,

Collegiate is a Christian private school here in the Highland Heights neighborhood.

Prince Williams: After Collegiate, what did you do next?

James D. Pearson Jr.: My time at Collegiate was my first exposure to the world of education; I was not a teacher, I was not part of the faculty but interacted with the faculty, with the head of the school and with the students. And when I first accepted that job someone suggested that I start a Boy Scout troop and so I did that in the fall of 2008.

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And recruited about 20 or 25 boys to join my troop. Some of these young men had never been out to the woods before, they'd never been camping so it was a new experience for them and I enjoyed exposing them to camping. Remember some of those first campouts when they were deathly afraid of just the little smallest spider but they soon got over those fears and got to where they enjoyed camping. Again, that was my first exposure to education and so that's what led me to my current career, teaching.

Fall of 2010, I enrolled at the University of Memphis in their Master of Arts and Teaching degree and completed that degree in three years, got a master's in teaching. And –

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that's what enabled me to get my first teaching position, first at Jeter Middle School then I spent a year at Millington at Millington Middle School and my third location was at Treadwell Middle School.

Prince Williams: How was it at Treadwell Middle School?

James D. Pearson Jr.: I thoroughly enjoyed my time here at Treadwell. Of course I had been involved in the neighborhood before and was involved as Scout Master of a Boy Scout Troop and Treadwell was really where I wanted to teach, I wanted to be here in the neighborhood. I felt like that would kind of complete the circle, if I was worshipping here and a scout leader here and then also teaching here at Treadwell. So I taught at Treadwell, let's see the 2012-13 school year –

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taught sixth grade math and science. But at the end of that school year Treadwell went into the Achievement School District as an innovation school zone school. Dr. Suzanne Brown was my

principal, so she stepped down and a new principal came in and so was not able to continue at Treadwell.

Allison Henry: How did you feel about leaving Treadwell?

James D. Pearson Jr.: It was sad but I guess public education, specifically here at Memphis with the unified school district, the combination of **Shelby** County and Memphis City Schools, it's been a very tumultuous time for teachers and administrators –

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just putting those two districts together. There've been a lot of changes in the districts and so that's been, I think, hard on everyone.

Prince Williams: How was it like interacting with the students from Treadwell?

James D. Pearson Jr.: I enjoyed teaching at Treadwell and interacting with those students. I consider myself to be very energetic and hopefully creative; I try to find unique ways to present the content of both the math and science content. 'Course I was a relatively new teacher then, hopefully I'm continuing to hone my craft and get better at teaching.

Prince Williams: Going back to Boy Scouts, how did you recruit?

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James D. Pearson Jr.: When I was at Collegiate, of course it was very easy, I'd visit with the boys at lunch and say, "Look, we're going camping this weekend or next weekend, wouldn't you like to go with us?" And course once I got kind of a nucleus of boys in the troop, we'd go camping and have a great time and then they would sell the program for me. They would go back to school the following Monday and talk about what a great time they had.

Same thing at Treadwell; Treadwell I was able to hand out flyers and recruit young men in my classes, my students. And sixth grade is a good year to get involved in Boy Scouts. The Cub Scout program runs through the fifth grade and then you cross over to a Boy Scout troop or you join a Boy Scout troop if you've not been involved in scouting previously.

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Boy scouting is a lot more exciting, a lot more freedom; with cub scouting you're typically camping with a parent but in Boy Scouting it's just a group of boys with a two or more adult leaders

kind of watching over the boys to make sure they don't do anything foolish, that they stay safe. But we, we had a great time.

Prince Williams: So would you say schools are a resource?

James D. Pearson Jr.: They are, for a scout leader that has the, is blessed to be in that school and also leading a troop in that neighborhood. I guess my situation was somewhat unique.

Prince Williams: What made you leave Boy Scouts?

James D. Pearson Jr.: Recruiting became an issue. When I left, first left the Collegiate School of Memphis and then left Treadwell –

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and moved to a school in southwest Memphis, lost that connection, that interaction with the boys in the neighborhood and was not able to continue to recruit young men and for a scout troop, a Boy Scout troop to remain healthy and active you have to continually be bringing in the next year of scouts. I stepped down as Scout Master this past December. There were five scouts that were part of the group that I originally recruited at Collegiate back in 2008 and 2009. Five of those scouts achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest rank in scouting. So one made Eagle in September, one in October and three in December. And so that was a good time for me to –

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step down as Scout Master.

Prince Williams: So how did you feel?

James D. Pearson Jr.: It was, it was sad because we had had some great times together, been on some and exciting campouts. Let's see, three out of the five that made Eagle were part of a group that I took to **Philmont** Scout Ranch the summer of 2011 which is in the northeast corner of New Mexico. And we went backpacking, backpacked about 72 miles through the wilderness of New Mexico, that part of New Mexico, beautiful part of the country. Climbed some mountains, saw a bear. So they really had grown as young men and conquered their fears and were able to not only survive but to thrive in that wilderness –

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environment.

Prince Williams: So what role do you play in the community?

James D. Pearson Jr.: While I was teaching at Treadwell, got involved in an organization called The Corners of Highland Heights, a Shalom community. And a close friend of mine, Fred Morton, heads up that organization. One of the first things that, one of the first projects that Corners took on was to sponsor a summer camp. And so I led, have led that summer camp for the past four summers, 2011 through 2014, an educational camp, a one to two week educational camp. We changed the format a little bit each year but this past summer, just last month, it was a one-week camp. We had students that were –

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second grade to eighth grade and of course it's a challenge to come up with curriculum that keeps that wide age range engaged in a week-long summer camp. But our theme was climate change, was global warming, and so we read a couple of books. We read The Lorax by Dr. Seuss and watched that movie. We read Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs and watched that movie and then talked through some of the environmental connections those books have. And then went on a couple of fieldtrips, went to the Agricenter and toured the Solar Farm at the Agricenter which was very interesting.

The Corners of Highland Heights had an opportunity get involved in a long-standing ministry –

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First Works. And that must have been the fall of 2012. And my wife, Amy, was asked to be the interim executive director of First Works. Amy is Director of Children's Ministry at St. Luke's United Methodist Church which is just south of here on Highland near the University of Memphis campus. And St. Luke's agreed to donate a portion of Amy's time so that she could come here and work with Highland Heights United Methodist Church with the Corners of Highland Heights and keep this ministry in operation.

First Works has been around for 15, 20 years, is operated out of a number of different churches and is –

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an after school tutoring program. And so for the past 2 years Amy's served at interim executive director and I assisted one year while I was teaching at Treadwell, was a middle school tutor. First Works meets 2 nights a week, Tuesday night and Thursday night and starts with dinner at 6:00 PM and then students are broken up into grade level and they're assigned teachers. And those teachers

assist with their homework or maybe provide some sort of math or science or reading lesson for the evening.

Kind of continue as treasurer for First Works, I'm not able to tutor because I'm no longer in the neighborhood and teaching at schools that are quite a distance away so not able to get back but continue as a –

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treasurer of First Works.

Prince Williams: What exactly is treasurer?

James D. Pearson Jr.: Just watch over the finances of that organization. Before I decided to go into teaching, I was a CPA, certified public accountant. So I have some kind of accounting knowledge and background that I can rely on.

Prince Williams: And what got you interested?

James D. Pearson Jr.: In First Works?

Prince Williams: Yes, sir.

James D. Pearson Jr.: You know it's so, it is, education is so important and so many students in the neighborhood need a little assistance. You know the school day is long; Treadwell is no an **I Zone** school, an Innovation Zone school and an extended school –

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day so, what 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM? Is that correct? Okay. But sometimes students need a little more help and so come into First Works for an hour for first a good, hot meal and then for an hour of tutoring we hope makes a difference in their education.

Prince Williams: What exactly got you interested in helping with the community?

James D. Pearson Jr.: Again it was, was starting at Collegiate, at the Collegiate School of Memphis and, you know, meeting some of the people here. Collegiate operates on the campus of the Highland Heights Baptist Church which is just one block west of here down **Faxon**, at the corner of Faxon and National. And getting to meet people –

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at Highland Heights Baptist Church, people at Highland Heights Methodist Church, you know over the process met Fred Morton, probably the summer of 2010 met Fred Morton. And Fred is an Eagle Scout and got involved in our Boy Scout troop. Fred had

started, had helped start the Corners of Highland Heights and so started to hear about kind of that ministry, some of the stories of the neighborhood. Fred grew up in the neighborhood and attended Treadwell for 12 years, 1st grade through 12th grade back when it was, when it went from 1st to 12th. And just fell in love with the neighborhood and just thought, "Well, maybe there's something I can do to, to help make this just a little bit better place."

Allison Henry: Going back to the First Works –

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and Corners of Highland Heights, do they have a great impact on the community?

James D. Pearson Jr.: I don't know about a great impact, it's probably a small impact but the way we look at it everything, every little bit helps. And I think we had 25 to 30 students that attend on a regular basis on Tuesday and Thursday nights. And so it's, you know, it's not only the meal and the tutoring but it's interaction with adults, a different group of adults; it's interaction with other students; it's character building. So you know, not a huge impact but if we're making a small impact on the lives of 20, 25 students we feel like that's worthwhile.

Prince Williams: What exactly got your wife interested?

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James D. Pearson Jr.: Let's see, what did get her, my wife interested? Probably the fact that I was already in the neighborhood, you know we'd spent time at Collegiate, as involved in a Boy Scout troop. At that I was teaching at Treadwell and she has always been very supportive of what I do and there was a pastor on staff at St. Luke's, Pastor Fritch, that had been involved in the First Works program before. And so she was instrumental in getting St. Luke's to donate some of Amy's time to help out. So it all, all the pieces kind of came together.

Prince Williams: Would you say you're interested in some of the history that Highland Heights has?

James D. Pearson Jr.: I am. Just traveled around with Fred, driving from street to street, picking up boy scouts and taking them home following meetings, picking up the students –

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that are involved in the Neighborhood History Camp and taking you guys home. Fred is always pointing out houses and saying, “Well, that’s the house I grew up in; that’s the house my wife grew up in.” You know and those type things, so – and Treadwell, the school itself has a great history. I think at one point Treadwell was one of only five high schools in the city of Memphis. So it goes back that far and there’ve been a number of outstanding and influential graduates that have come from Treadwell School.

Prince Williams: Would you give any advice to the youth of Highland Heights?

James D. Pearson Jr.: Your education is probably the most important thing that you’re doing right now. You know, going to school is your job, just like teaching is my job; going to school is your job and you need to really do your best, work hard –

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try to learn everything that your teachers are presenting to you. What I tell my students is, you know, what you taught in the sixth grade then you’re gonna be behind in the seventh and the eighth and the ninth. And so you gotta keep up every year which what you’re taught because it builds, seventh grade builds on sixth, eighth grade builds on seventh, and so it’s very important that you stay focused and do your best. Lot of students think that the reason they’re in school is to play and spend time with their socializing, with their friends, and there’s a time for that, that’s important. But when you’re in class and the teacher’s trying to share something with you, impart knowledge, you need to be open to that.

Allison Henry: We would –

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like to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

James D. Pearson Jr.: Thank you, I’ve enjoyed it.

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