Paris Westbrook: – for letting us interview you for Crossroads of Freedom and for the record could you state your name please?

Sylvester Fulton: I'm Sylvester Fulton.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and for the record I'm Paris Westbrook.

Daniel Saba: I'm Daniel Saba.

Paris Westbrook: Alright.

Sylvester Fulton: Nice to meet both of you.

Daniel Saba: Nice to meet you.

Paris Westbrook: Nice to meet you. Can you tell us where you were born?

Sylvester Fulton: I was born right here in Memphis, Tennessee at John Gaston Hospital, where African-Americans were born back in that time.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: And that was in 1959.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and what's your occupation?

Sylvester Fulton: I've been employed by Federal Express for 26 years now and ____.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and for the record could you tell us your parents' name?

Sylvester Fulton: Walter and Lavelle Fulton.

Paris Westbrook: Alright and could you describe to us what growing up here in Memphis was like?

Sylvester Fulton: It was uneventful. My home was very protected and spirit filled. So for me I just grew up at home and did what kids will do

[01:00]

and we respect our adults at homes and neighbors. We played in the streets, we played in the backyard. It was a very safe environment. Growing up I can't think of anything happening that was threatening. So I would say it was just a typical childhood for most of the people that I knew.

Paris Westbrook: Where did you grow up at, like what street?

Sylvester Fulton: Stonewall Street in Hyde Park, that's north from Chelsea. It's north of Chelsea and east of Hollywood.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: And my neighborhood was unique in that about three blocks away was a wooded area we called the levy. That's where a lot of the kids went to play after school and a lot of things went on that we learned about but that's where we played a lot, like the playground of the neighborhood.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Did you have any brothers and sisters growing up?

Sylvester Fulton: Yes I have three brothers and four sisters.

Paris Westbrook: Okay, are you the youngest or the middle?

Sylvester Fulton: Number six.

Paris Westbrook: Number six, okay.

[02:00]

Can you tell us what your community was like growing up, the Hyde Park community?

Sylvester Fulton: Well growing up we were only exposed to my father's vacation which was when we went to Mississippi, like the Delta part of Mississippi, which was a very depressed area. So for us we were in a very poor – we knew then that Hyde Park was really an okay place to live. It was basically working class environment where people went to church in the neighborhood, they got their hair cut in the neighborhood, got their shoes repaired in the neighborhood, and you basically shopped for groceries in the neighborhood which is Hollywood, which like I say it's considered part of Hyde Park. You got your groceries and bought your clothes and when you ventured out of the neighborhood it was either to go to an event like a graduation, maybe a wedding or a funeral, or we'd go to Sears across town for Christmas shopping. Other than that you did most of your business right there in Hyde Park.

Paris Westbrook: Okay, so everything – well you just said everything, shopping,

[03:00]

partying, things of that nature, everything was done in the neighborhood.

Sylvester Fulton: Right, exactly

Paris Westbrook: Nobody ventured out.

Sylvester Fulton: As a kid; once you got older in high school you found out that or you thought that the prettiest girl lived in Whitehaven or went to Havenview High School. You ventured out then but even though for the most part a lot was done in Hyde Park.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What middle school and high school did you go to?

Sylvester Fulton: I attended Cypress Junior High School and Kingsbury High School. I would have gone to Douglass but I was in the third year of integration in the Memphis City School system so I was bused from Hyde Park area to Kingsbury.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Can you tell us what before integration what your school years were like?

Sylvester Fulton: They were proud years. We had back in that day teachers, some of them lived in the neighborhood. So you had a lot of school pride and schools at that time were like the –

[04:00]

I would say the, what's the word I'm looking for, the hallmark or the watershed of the community and the community kind of wrapped around the schools and anything the schools produced. The principals were like professionals. They were psychologists, sociologists; they were everything, your judge and jury. So that's what the schools were like prior to integration. Once we got integrated and we got bused to the Kingsbury area we lost a lot of that and to this day you don't have class reunions for the people. My peers don't have class reunions because bussing wasn't ready for us and we weren't ready for bussing. So we lost a lot of it in that sense. We lost a lot of family, a lot of connections, and we often talk, you'll see classmates and others at funerals and we'll say, "Let's get together for a reunion or something," and that's as far as it goes right there.

Paris Westbrook: Did you participate in any sports or activities

[05:00]

in middle school or high school?

Sylvester Fulton: In high school. In high school I played football and I wasn't good. Let's just say I rode the bench in football to be honest about it and I ran track.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Going back to integration, you just said that when the schools were integrated it affected I guess the sense of school pride, a sense of family and everything like that. Did you see a change in your community when integration started to happen?

Sylvester Fulton: Most definitely. One of the biggest changes came with the closing of Douglass High School and Douglass High School was not located in Hyde Park but it was a Hyde Park school and Douglass may be six or seven miles from Hyde Park but it still impacted Hyde Park. All of my older brothers and sisters, of the eight of us, four of us went to Douglass and their friends. We have people in the neighborhood who our parents graduated from Douglass. So it was so accessible. It was leadership in the community.

[06:00]

So once Douglass closed down maybe in '82, basically that leadership was gone. When that school closed down it also impacted your mom and pop businesses, the mom and pop stores catered to the school kids, the school traffic. They closed down. The cosmetology school catered to the school teachers and that school traffic. It closed down. So, when that school left, a lot of things went with it and then you had urban blight. There was graffiti all over the empty buildings, homes, all those kinds of things. So that impacted us a whole lot. Even before Douglass school closed parents stopped going to the PTA meetings because you used to walk to Cypress and Shannon and PTA meetings, graduations were like public, were like social events for the community and people dressed up and you'd see them walking to Shannon for a PTA meeting or walking to Cypress for a PTA meeting. When the PTA meetings were held in Kingsbury, you couldn't walk to Kingsbury and you didn't feel welcomed at Kingsbury. There's communications

[07:00]

barriers or disconnects right there. So that definitely impacted the community and I don't know how great but it was a great impact.

Daniel Saba: You mentioned how it affected the community. What was it like for you to go to this different school?

Sylvester Fulton: It was extremely interesting, alright. My 9th grade year I had an outstanding teacher, Mr. Richard Lacey. He taught English but he also taught life skills. He taught African-American history. So we left Cypress feeling like we were ready to take on the world. We had a whole six weeks of nothing but Malcolm X and other African-American heroes. So, when we attended Kingsbury we came with the attitude of not necessarily a hardcore Black Power attitude but we were very proud of who we were and our ancestry. Coming to Kingsbury, between the summers, you had – again we're only the third year of bussing so people aren't used to getting along yet. So basically we didn't know where we were going

[08:00]

and the school wasn't ready for us. I've often thought that it would have been a better situation had the school came to us and said, "Hey, welcome to Kingsbury High School," like maybe in June or the spring of last year, Cypress had said, "Hey we've got football, we've got this, we've got all kinds of activities for you to be involved in." But all we heard was the negative from former students, how bad it was. It's a different culture. People dance differently; they sing differently, everything is different. So we got to a school that was just different. But now we were going to play football and basketball and go to school. We were going to do that. But there were people that were not ready for what was coming out of Hyde Park and so there were some conflicts, there were some issues. There were some people who didn't realize they were in school until October-November. By that time you'd been in trouble, you'd been labeled. There were people in administration who were African-American who were not ready for African-American problems and kids. I was at the school one day and actually

[09:00]

my history teacher, one of my football friends was acting up and she asked me, "What should I do about him?" I'm like, "You're asking me? I like what he's doing." But those situations you ran into a lot of times. You had principals who would say, "He's not

black, he's not white, he's just green," those kinds of things when we wanted to say, "Yeah we're black," but they didn't know how to deal with us at that time and they were honest good people but they were just not prepared for the Hyde Park students.

Paris Westbrook: How did other students from your community that were bussed over to that school, how did they deal with it?

Sylvester Fulton: It was – there were differences. A lot of us just dealt with it. You know, you went to school. You had to go to school so you went. There were some people that had attitudes. There were some days there were fights and no one knew why. You know, I played football.

[10:00]

So that was interesting in that when you're on a football team you're part of a team. Color has no – you're a team. You're fighting together. You're practicing in the August heat together. You're going to games together. You shower together. All these things happen on a football team. What happens when a black student decides that he has an attitude with a white football player and a fight breaks out? What do you do as an African-American? Do you defend your football teammate and fight the black student that you've got to go home with and live within the neighborhood? So you get in situations like that where you didn't know how to deal with things. Like you just stayed away and accepted whatever came with it. There were times when I personally got insulted. One of the white football players got upset and called me a nigger. Well I looked at the coach like, "Are you gonna do something about this?" He didn't know what to do either. So what do you do? You know, so it hurt my feelings but you just learn to deal with those things

[11:00]

and move on. The same guy by the way he's a southern minister now and I saw him the other day, not long ago. I wanted to hit him. No, it's all good.

Paris Westbrook: What year did you graduate from high school?

Sylvester Fulton: 1977.

Paris Westbrook: 1977, so okay, during I guess your younger years when civil rights was just – well you were younger but civil rights was just

beginning to start, do you remember anything about that or what the community was like or were your parents involved?

Sylvester Fulton: I remember very well. The year was 1968. I can recall the day Dr. King got killed. I had older brothers and sisters who were already into Stokely Carmichael and Black Power and all that. So we were pretty much aware of what was going on plus the music at that time, I can't think of some of those songs but we heard them a lot around the house.

[12:00]

So, when Dr. King came to Memphis, we had some aspects of it but we didn't know how great of an impact until he got assassinated. I remember playing in the front yard, my daddy on the front porch looking off into space, and he was just staring out and I asked him what happened and he said, "Dr. King got killed," and the whole neighborhood that day felt, it felt gloomy and after that there were some issues when we had the National Guard riding down the street. It was strange to be on Stonewall Street and you see tanks and trucks full of men with M-16s riding down the street; all that was strange. I still didn't know exactly what was going on throughout the city. I knew we had heard about a riot or something downtown or something on Beale Street but you never knew exactly what really went on, as a kid. I was like 7 or 8 years old. I do recall all of that going on.

Paris Westbrook: What were – do you remember your feelings about it as a child, like Dr. King

[13:00]

and, you know, the sanitation strikes and things that were really hostile going on in your city?

Sylvester Fulton: All I can remember was what I was hearing about the riots downtown, Dr. King being killed and the churches, people were upset about it and hurt. I can recall as a high school senior when I guess when they were implementing the Dr. King holiday, some of the white students would say it was James Earl Ray day, those kinds of things. I remember reading one of politicians from North Carolina, I can't remember his name, one of the older politicians, who was trying to inhibit this holiday from coming saying that Dr. King was a Communist, he's a homosexual, and you become – you're involved from listening and you're defensive. So those were my early memories of the civil rights years in Memphis. Of

course we had people like Maxine Smith. I remember her and the NAACP and the things they were doing. But other than those people I really

[14:00]

didn't know a whole lot about what else was going on in the city.

Paris Westbrook: After you graduated high school what did you go on to do?

Sylvester Fulton: Well like a lot of my friends, we wanted a car, a girlfriend. I had a lot of girlfriends. So a lot of my peers either went to the Army or we worked and went to college.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: A lot of them did go to the Army and they did like four years. One or two may have made a career out of it. My buddy from the track team, we were very close, and a lot of us worked at Southwest Tennessee Community College; well it was called Shelby State back then, and we took classes like logic and psychology. We were trying to be smart. Then some of us finished and some didn't and some got jobs and had families.

Paris Westbrook: So after you graduated from high school you went on to do community college classes and things of that and working and things of that nature?

Sylvester Fulton: Well the first thing I did was I got a job

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at Sears uptown; that ten-story dinosaur midtown. I worked there off and on from 1977 to 1980.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: And I learned a lot at Sears. I was 17 and I was employed with people that were 60 and 50 and 30 and 25. So I learned a lot.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Do you remember the closing Sears?

Sylvester Fulton: Vaguely. I remember my first summer, '77, I got hired for the Christmas rush. Think about this. I got hired for the Christmas rush in July. Christmas is like in December. The warehouse, the shipping/receiving area where I worked you had to walk sideways

through boxes all up in there. You had maybe a mile of boxes to be sorted and shipped out in the southern region for Sears. The next year I remember that you didn't see

[16:00]

that kind of volume until like September/October. You could see it coming. It was slowly decreasing. I got laid off I think after one of the Christmas seasons. You know you've got a down time after Christmas. You get laid off for a while and I got called back but I'd been working at Sears when they really started laying off but a lot of people started to transfer to the other store and I think started to retire and every now and then you see some of those same things, some of those same Sears employees. It really was a close knit group.

Paris Westbrook: Okay, to kind of backtrack to integration, when things became integrated, did people in your community start to move out and move into different neighborhoods?

Sylvester Fulton: In my community?

Paris Westbrook: Mhm.

Sylvester Fulton: No. Well I take that back. There was an exodus probably somewhere around '75, '74 which I don't think had

[17:00]

anything to do with bussing but a lot of people moved to Raleigh and Frayser areas. Some moves to Whitehaven. I think that may be because maybe those started moving out when housing started to become available in those areas but a lot of people in Hyde Park left for better housing situations. It wasn't even about school I don't think.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Did you have a question?

Daniel Saba: Well I just wanted to really go back. You mentioned something about going to Mississippi with your family when you were young.

Sylvester Fulton: Right.

Daniel Saba: Do you remember sort of comparing that to Memphis?

Sylvester Fulton: It was like a prairie, apples and oranges too, grapes. My father worked at Rainbow, he retired from Rainbow after 40 years. He would only get like two weeks' vacation

[18:00]

and the first week he made working around the house and the second weekend we would go for that day, that Saturday, to Clarksdale, Mississippi and Marks, Mississippi where he had sisters and that was the Delta and actually that's all we knew about Mississippi at that time. We didn't know about Biloxi and places where that's different. All we knew was the Delta which was you had people still living in original sharecroppers' homes. We went to see my aunt and outside of Clarksdale in Shelby, Mississippi she lived in an old house, a very old house, in the middle of this field, nothing around it but this field. We thought she was rich because we thought, "Wow, she got all this." We found out later that that was an original sharecropper. I don't think she was a sharecropper at that time. But she was an older woman and her daughter lived with her and her daughter's kids and they may have, I'm not totally sure, but that's where we spent our day, most of the day on Saturday.

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Then we would leave there and drive maybe sixteen miles to Marks, Mississippi where this sister lived in the town. It was like a one flashing light town, in a shotgun house on the corner down there and we'd visit them for half a day and that's basically all we saw in Mississippi. I didn't see it was wonderful until I drove down to Biloxi, Mississippi and I saw a whole different side of Mississippi. I thought everything in Mississippi looked like the Delta, which was a very depressed area. In fact Marks was once described by Dr. King as the poorest city in America for his time and it's still kind of a little bit like that today.

Paris Westbrook: Did that affect – I don't know, did that affect the way you thought as a kid or the way you wanted things to be for you and your community, seeing places in Mississippi that were very, very poor and rural?

Sylvester Fulton: Not really. We were mean I guess on this.

[20:00]

If you said to anybody you were from Mississippi, they thought less of you. We thought we were big shots in Memphis. When people who lived in Mississippi who moved away came home for whatever reason, a wedding, funeral, graduation, they always came home looking like they were big shots. My daddy always say they'd on shades on and white shoes, like he was big time from Mississippi. There were people who left Mississippi who moved off to Chicago and Gary, Indiana. A lot of people left Mississippi for better opportunities, especially the Delta and you would follow sometimes them to Chicago sometimes and after find out they weren't any better – the opportunities. Many of them had jobs but they were living sometimes in horrible conditions because the image of the Delta, it wasn't really pretty and you had to leave because there weren't any opportunities and there was a lot of negative history living in Mississippi and talking about my father, he explained to me at 13

[21:00]

that he had to walk so many miles to a store or a school to trade for goods and other kinds of things. He had to go to the store. By 13, he supported the family at 13. We equated all this with Mississippi. You should be in school at 13, that kind of thing. You hear stories about some of the violence, those kinds of things. He would tell me how he'd listen to Joe Louis and Otis Franks in a store and you couldn't enjoy it until you got out of earshot of the store owner. So all of that is what we knew about Mississippi. So it wasn't pretty but it really wasn't a really good view of Mississippi.

Paris Westbrook: Growing up do you remember what race relations were like for you here in Memphis? You just spoke about your father's experiences in Mississippi. Did you have any similar experiences or did your father maybe ever speak to you on race or growing up

[22:00]

as a young black man or anything like that?

Sylvester Fulton: Not really. We didn't know what white people looked like. Now you've got to understand something. We had black and white TV so we didn't see the skin color of a white person. I thought they were really white, like the color of paper, because we didn't see white people. Now you may have seen one when the insurance man came out to the house. The insurance man came with these big old thick books that they'd write down what you ordered. But

for the most part you didn't see white people. You didn't see them really. So I literally thought they were white, just white. But there wasn't a race issue. It wasn't a problem. It wasn't a problem anywhere in the community and my father didn't talk about it as a problem.

Daniel Saba: Race at school, later when the schools were integrated, was that your first major experience then, I guess besides the insurance man?

Sylvester Fulton: Well Cypress was at that time 7th through the 9th grade.

[23:00]

When bussing started, the first plan with bussing was to make Cypress a 7th through 8th grade school. They brought 8th graders over from Kingsbury area. So that was the first time I got to interact and actually got to know white people at that point and unfortunately, I shouldn't say unfortunately, but the ones who came to Cypress were the ones we believed couldn't get out of that public schools. So I guess we had good kids but we had guys who were thugs and a lot of time the thugs got along fine. The black and white thugs got along real good. They're all thugs together. But you had a situation where whites were being bullied. Everybody had all this hostility built up. I fault the school system for that. There was no buffer or preparation or anything. You basically dumped people off and told them to get along. I got to say there's a problem with that. You shouldn't use kids and young people to handle adult problems. That's basically what the system did. We go make the kids handle it

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and that wasn't good. That's another story, another time.

Paris Westbrook: After you graduated from high school and you took classes and things like that, did you start a family or anything?

Sylvester Fulton: Well, when I graduated from high school, I say this all the time, y'all gonna laugh at this too, I had a 20 year plan for college and I did it in ten. That's my way of kind of saying I was kind of slow. I graduated from the Morehouse College in 1977 but I was working at Federal Express and at the time I graduated crack had moved into the neighborhood and I saw a lot of change and so I figured let me get out of here and get a new experience before graduate school. My goal was to spend one year at FedEx just to

get some life experiences and I was in Kansas, a very small town, and I would go to graduate school but I never got back. After a while I went back to graduate school

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but my girlfriend I was dating since '78 we got married in '87. I moved back to Kansas and my daughter was born in 1990 in Birmingham and then we moved from Kansas to Birmingham to get closer to Memphis. I moved back here in '96 and so that's my road. I made a lot of bumps along the way. Ten years in school, you know, I did some things I loved. I flunked some classes, I changed some majors, I changed colleges, but I did a few things I shouldn't have.

Paris Westbrook: When did you come back to Memphis?

Sylvester Fulton: 1996.

Paris Westbrook: 1996.

Sylvester Fulton: I wanted to go back to school. I was a courier at FedEx and I enjoyed my job but I felt that there was more for me to do than drive a van. I really enjoyed it though. I came back here and enrolled in Christian Brothers University for my Master's in education and I said one day I'm gonna use it when I'm done with FedEx and I'd go into education.

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My certifications paved the way and I think I would love to work with 5th and 6th graders.

Paris Westbrook: When you came back to Memphis did you go back to Hyde Park?

Sylvester Fulton: Close, Jackson and Stonewall, up in that area, that's where I live.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Did you start getting more involved in the community? You said previously when crack hit your neighborhood you kind of left. So when you came back did you get more involved in the community, or you know?

Sylvester Fulton: Actually in '87 when I left to go to Kansas, I got involved. That's when I really got involved in the community. The population there was like 47,000, 7% total minority. It wasn't NAACP then.

Paris Westbrook: This is in Kansas?

Sylvester Fulton: In Kansas. I joined the NAACP and became a youth counselor. That's where my community service actually started.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

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Sylvester Fulton: We moved to Alabama, I wasn't very much involved in the community but I was involved in my fraternity and we did a lot of community service work that way but I really wasn't attached to anything. It was just in the fraternity you had these projects to do and programs. Moved back to Memphis in '96, my sister was working with the Boy Scout and Girl Scout troop at the church so that started I guess my track in Memphis getting involved with kids and doing things. After that, I was elected president of my fraternity in Memphis. Big Brothers Big Sisters came and said, "Hey we've got a national scholarship going on and we need you to provide 50 scholarships for 50 students." As the president I was the first man and I'm still I'm involved with the national Big Brothers Big Sisters. So I'm involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters, the National Kidney Foundation, Memphis Special Olympics. I do volunteer work at Carnes Elementary School and anything else that I can do.

Paris Westbrook: With all the

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community oriented things that you do, how has that affected your way of looking at Hyde Park, where you're from, and other communities similar to Hyde Park, you know, across the nation, social things like that in general?

Sylvester Fulton: I honestly wish I could do more for Hyde Park. I'm doing so much. If there was a program in Hyde Park that I was approached about I would say yes but I'm doing so much in other places. I'm very pleased and happy the Cypress Alumni Association is as big as it is. At some point in time, and I'm not scheduled, but I will put that on my agenda. But Hyde Park has a lot of positive things going. There are some guys that I went to high school with, Johnnie Harper; you need to talk to that guy.

Paris Westbrook: Johnnie Harper?

Sylvester Fulton: Johnnie Harper, Johnnie played football at Cypress, Kingsbury, he played for Southern Bernard and he also played for a professional football team. But he's a minister

[29:00]

now and he's very involved in regional development in Hyde Park. There are a few others I'm very proud of them. The Cypress principal, Dr. James ____, who passed away a few years ago, before he passed away they had this big event for him. I was working. I couldn't attend it. They had two picnics and all the people that were on the program for the most part were people from Hyde Park, from the north side of Chelsea, and Johnnie is one of those guys who came up and he's involved in camp young people. In fact he had a rally at his church very recently and I participated on that. So I'm not as involved as I would like to be but at some point in time I will move that way. In fact one of my little brothers, through Big Brothers I asked for a kid from Hyde Park. I wanted someone tat needed a whole lot of help and a lot of attention. So I did for a while mentor a kid in Hyde Park.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. How has Hyde Park, the Hyde Park community

[30:00]

and doing what you do, how has that affected your life?

Sylvester Fulton: Say that again? I'm sorry.

Paris Westbrook: The Hyde Park community, how the Hyde Park community and working in the Hyde Park community and with the boys and girls clubs and, you know, things of that nature, how has that affected your life?

Sylvester Fulton: It's motivational and I hope I can say it in a positive way. In my mind, if there's a problem with African-American males in Hyde Park there's a problem all over and maybe you may not be touching somebody in Hyde Park but it reminds you when you go to that same population somewhere else, if I'm driving down McNeil Street or Stonewall Street and I see guys hanging out. It's an ugly scene but it makes me feel like I've got to keep on going and see what I can do. Maybe some kid may be changed by it someplace else. You can always pray that somebody can reach on in Hyde Park. But one of my dreams, I'm gonna share a dream

with you, a vision that I have, and this is something that has something to do with people giving. There are about

[31:00]

fifteen churches on the north side of Chelsea and May Street to Hollywood. I've seen fifteen churches with unlimited square footage being underutilized on Tuesday nights, Thursday nights, Fridays, Saturdays. My vision would be, and I've often wrote this on paper, saying maybe one day I could do this. Couldn't they coordinate something among all those churches on one Friday; the church could use this little room for piano practice. By the way every church has a piano or an organ. Use this time to train people on the piano or organ. Another church with another vacant room they're not using throughout the week let them do an art class for kids. Another church that has a vacant room, teach karate in that church. It takes a lot of cooperation and a lot of giving. That's one of the things that I would love to see in Hyde Park. Now do I know how to get there? I don't know how to get there but that to me would change the community a whole lot. But again, it takes a lot of giving and

[32:00]

a lot of time.

Daniel Saba: You mentioned – you just mentioned the churches and having them play a more active role in the community. When you were growing up did they play a large role or has the role changed in the community?

Sylvester Fulton: I think their role was huge because see when I was growing up people actually walked to church. We lived on Stonewall so there were a couple churches on our street. So people would walk to church. We walked to church and people were actually part of neighborhood churches. The neighborhood church provided relief. Now the same problems we're confronted with today, that's where people go to get recharged. It's a social place. A lot of times you got information about the civil rights movement through the church. We didn't have as much TV but that's where you got information. Two churches in particular, Summerfield and Prince of Peace, had very nice sophisticated

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kindergartens. A lot of kids were educated initially at Prince of Peace. I think it's moved a couple times now but it's on the corner of ____ in Hyde Park and some of it is still active as a kindergarten. So those were the two that I know provide a whole lot of education in the community.

Paris Westbrook: Aside from the church involvement can you tell us anything else that's changed from your community and when you were growing up and the community now?

Sylvester Fulton: Yeah we used to – we were creative. Kids were creative. We used to play basketball in Jerry Jones back yard, a girl's back yard. We had a real nice metal basketball goal that you could put wheels on and put in the street. People dug holes and they took wood and they stuck them in the ground and put a piece of plywood on the back and put a

[34:00]

basket on it, the same basket you see in the gym but you have to nail it and screw it and all kind of stuff. After a while that thing was going to fall down, lean to the left or lean to the right or lean forward. It didn't matter if you played basketball on that goal sunup to sundown. Sometime you even played in dust. You feel good enough it's go get dusty and you go get the neighbors' clothes dirty hanging out on clotheslines. We had clotheslines, alright? We didn't have dryers. So we'd go outside and play all day and get sweaty and muddy but you'd play all day. That has changed. Now kids don't do that. We had sandlot football where we'd play football. Most football teams had eleven players on each team. You might see 25 on each team because we just played and nobody got hurt. We had teams like the guys on Davis Street wanted to play the guys on Stonewall Street and the guys in Lyon Street and Maplewood Street. You had that kind of stuff going on. People got along. There was no fighting. Everybody got along. We just played and we had a lot of fun like that. We played baseball

[35:00]

in the street. How you play baseball in the street? You could knock windows out, but they didn't, hit the ball straight I guess. But we had all that kind of fun. No one played golf that I know of.

Paris Westbrook: Can you – why do you think the community has changed the way that it has, less involvement, you know, a lesser sense of community I guess everybody being not as cohesive?

Sylvester Fulton: There are probably a lot of reasons. I think the school situation hurt us tremendously. The introduction of drugs hurt us. We had a lot of – we see that's a problem today, unplanned childbirth that hurt us. In fact I read something a few years ago that the 38108 zip code has the highest mortality rate

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of all the sixteen largest cities in the country. I think Detroit just beat us out recently but a lot of those kids who survive that have other problems too. That's part of the issue too. That's part of a lot of reasons that account for this. _____ closed down. A lot of men worked at _____ but Sears closed down and ____ closed down. So I think we're just in a situation now where we're the victim of other things going on around the city. There's not one single issue that accounts for this change but a lot of things. You walking down the street and I see a son of one of my peers that's on the street corner because his father's on the street corner. That's from a lack of leadership, a lack of training. When you're in a school system that says you can't touch my child anymore, that's part of the problem. But then again when you watch TV and you hear little city officials

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arguing with each other and bickering, that's part of the problem. It's a lot of things going into the problem and you really can't, you know, put your finger on one thing. Selfishness is part of the problem. When this church came through, when this church, when all your money sucked into a few people and not shared with other people, that's part of the problem. When your businesses allow people to hang out at the corner and write stuff on the walls and all kind of vulgarity, that's part of the problem. When I drive down Hyde Park and I see peoples' grass is high and the lack of volunteers is part of the problem. I'm part of the problem. I've said a hundred times that for my birthday which is a week from now I would love to lead up an effort to go down and cut Hyde Park. That street is the namesake of the community. Why can't it be cut? That little piece of grass between the street and the sidewalk,

[38:00]

I don't know what you call it. I don't even know who owns it, if the city owns it or the homeowners but why can't you cut that grass and keep it cut where people driving to Shelby can see something nice? Why can't somebody go out and say, "We're gonna get this started and maybe some other people in the neighborhood will catch on?" But that's part of the problem. People don't want to give and volunteer their time. If I go to the church and say I need ten men with ten lawnmowers, we're gonna get this done but somebody got the get that. So I'm part of the problem. You part of the problem and you part of the problem and you part of the problem.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember how events like Cypress Creek, the closing – well I don't know if you remember the closing of Hollywood Theater, but Cypress Creek, the Shannon Siege, do you remember how events like that affected your community and the communities around you or any specifics?

Sylvester Fulton: Well Cypress Creek was a good thing because

[39:00]

it brought out leadership like in John Harold, Emmitt, James, those guys were like young and they had a lot of energy and they were go-getters. They didn't take no for an answer. Another guy, Brother N.T. Green, I don't know if anybody mentioned him before, but Brother N.T. Green named himself brother and he was very big and very vocal about Cypress Creek. So they brought us luck. Everybody felt good and basically we established new leadership and we felt very good about what was before us and going on with the local politicians. A Down for us was the Shannon Street incident. I think from day one we didn't understand what happened. It didn't help our relationship with the city of Memphis because I think the consensus would be in the neighborhood that those men were assassinated and it's like there's no respect here where you have to take that information. You can't talk about it; you can't do anything with it. You can't argue about it.

[40:00]

It's well-documented and I guess you can say the case may well be closed. But the house still remains. I don't know if you've seen it but it's there.

Paris Westbrook: It's boarded up.

Sylvester Fulton: It's a reminder that that happened that day.

Paris Westbrook: Go ahead.

Daniel Saba: Well just before the interview did you mention something about the theater?

Sylvester Fulton: Oh yeah I think around '76-'77 it was opened and that's where we got to see a lot of movies likes *Shaft* and I don't know if they were B-rated movies, I guess, but they were old movies and we went to see them there. But it was nice. Again, it was a nice environment and we enjoyed the movies. Now I don't know exactly when it closed but it had a lot of business there.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. You had mentioned earlier when I asked you about Dr. King you said you had memories of your brothers and sisters

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as far as the Black Power movement and Stokely Carmichael. What were your parents' feelings about Dr. King and Malcolm X and all those people, all the social changes that were going on in that time?

Sylvester Fulton: I'm not sure. Well first of all I'm not even sure that they even had a feeling about Malcolm X. Everybody was endeared to Martin Luther King. Based on my father's actions I know it meant something, his death. Now my grandmother was married to a sanitation worker and he was actually on strike with that movement. So we didn't get a lot of information really. I didn't. I was young. I'm sure my older brothers and sisters talked about it. But I really didn't have a clue other than I knew something was going on. I knew what was going on but I didn't know any substance.

Paris Westbrook: Okay, okay

[42:00]

Daniel Saba: You mentioned the introduction of drugs affecting the community so I was interested in hearing I guess your take on crime in the community. Has it gotten worse? And then also you were talking a little bit about the Shannon Siege events and police relations up to the present day in the community.

Sylvester Fulton: Okay what you want first? Just Shannon, police relations? Personally I never had an issue. But we all have this understanding the police cause trouble. They really don't. Actually they solve a lot of problems too. But with the Shannon incident I was working at FedEx at the time and I remember I went to work and came home and I think the siege was still going on and it was getting dark and I figured if they were gonna leave them in there now maybe when the sunlight comes up

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and it'd be over. I was shocked when I found out that they had gone in there. My thinking is at some point they'd get hot or they'd get hungry and they'd come out. I did not foresee that they would go in and do that. So when it happened the talking on the street was that two officers, one called Starsky and one called Hutch that was the street name. Again I didn't know what was going on but just on the street you're hearing things. You hear a lot of stuff. You don't know what to believe. So supposedly according to the word on the street these officers were being abandoned and at the time they were sentenced he was not a bad guy. He basically had his own rendition and some of those guys in that house had changed their lying around and the police came to the house looking for somebody else who wasn't even part of nothing and was arrogant and Mr. Sanders I guess didn't appreciate what they were doing. They could have walked away, "We got the wrong house, I'm sorry," from what I understand.

[44:00]

Bu that's the way it is.

Daniel Saba: And that was a critical event I guess in police relations but have they changed at all since then or have they pretty much just remained the same for the past couple of decades?

Sylvester Fulton: I honestly don't have any idea. I don't know. When you have the police force, it's changed its face quite a bit. There are as many black officers in the neighborhood as white officers. So you can't say it's a racist issue and a lot of people appreciate big time the police. You have to. We've got some people in the neighborhood that's totally out of control and any police presence, you don't care what it is, what color, what gender, just bring it. So I would think yes depending who you are and no depending who you are but for the most part I think they are very much so appreciated.

Daniel Saba: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: I want to think that.

[45:00]

Paris Westbrook: As far as your community involvement, has there been anything specific that you're very proud of, I guess as far as boys and girls club. I think you mentioned something about a kidney –

Sylvester Fulton: National Kidney Foundation.

Paris Westbrook: Yeah, is there anything specific that you're very proud of that you've done?

Sylvester Fulton: That I've done?

Paris Westbrook: Mhm.

Sylvester Fulton: No. Yeah, let me talk about the community first.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: One of the things that I did see happen was I saw a stand against drugs. Oniel Crippens was preaching at a church around the corner, I think Greater Mt. Zion at the time, and on my front porch I sitting there thinking what are they doing. They led a march down the street and I was just gonna go up there and look at the march go by. He turned the march into a parade. They were singing and going down the street. Okay, good, so I'm glad they did that.

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I looked up and I saw my nephew and my niece in the march and I thought, "Oh wait a minute, I've got to join this march." So we walked through the neighborhood. At the time one of the streets had a real bad drug problem. There may have been a big bust on the street a couple weeks ago or something like that and I was very proud that somebody decided to do something to make a statement. So that was a very proud moment out of Hyde Park. I'm sure there are others. We've had a lot of teachers who lived in Hyde Park when they didn't move out when they could have. We've got a young lady on the street now, Greta Crippens, who works with the city school board. She still stays in that home on Stonewall Street. Those are the things that I'm very proud of. Another good friend

of mine, Lisa Frieson, she's the principal of Cummings School. She's a homeowner in Hyde Park. So those are things that I'm proud of. Personally I was selected a national Big Brother hero in 2006

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and it took me a lot of places I never thought I would go. In fact I can say that now because I've been going this before, microphone and cameras and lights and stuff. I still feel a little nervous though. During that time, let's see what did I do, I was a guest DJ on one of the radio stations. I was interviewed by *The Washington Post* newspaper and national radio, how I got a call from *The Washington Post*, that kind of stuff. I went to Capitol Hill and I visited all the congressmen and senators and that kind of stuff. Actually I was walking behind Big Brothers lobbyists and they don't eat. They just run. The next day I went to the White House and to the Oval Office and we spent about 30 minutes with President Bush.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Daniel Saba: Wow.

Sylvester Fulton: And that same day I addressed my fraternity. It was our centennial convention with about 3,000 people in the room

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and I had to get up and maybe talk two or three words and I was so nervous. So I've done that and other things with Big Brothers. I was invited to speak to different groups about Big Brothers and I spoke to groups in Chattanooga, in Kansas, and places around the city of Memphis.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Sylvester Fulton: So that was an interesting couple of years I guess.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Along with your proudest moments, was there any significant moment in your life or maybe it was just like, "Aha," or, "Wow, this is something I'll never forget."

Sylvester Fulton: Well yeah, one day my little brother came to my house or I picked him up and he didn't know how to tie a necktie. So I taught him how to tie his necktie and I also talked about

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the necktie and talked about personal presentation, what it symbolized and that day he went home with thirteen neckties all around his neck. Now he graduated from high school last year and he needed a necktie, a black necktie. A black necktie is hard to find. So I bought him a necktie and met him at the school and I watched him tie his own necktie. I told him when he was like 6 or 7 years old one day he'd tie his own necktie. But the challenge is you spread and you share with other people and for me to watch him tie that tie at graduation gives me a bit of immortality because he learned something that I taught him that he's gonna do the rest of his life. That didn't make the newspaper but I felt good about that. In fact a few years before then at a fraternity convention we were talking about mentoring and I shared that necktie, teaching the necktie and why I did it and how I did it in a

[50:00]

small committee meeting. Some of the people repeated it again at a larger meeting and now people are using that necktie. I'm sure somebody thought of it before I did but I see more and more now where people are using it and teaching neckties, how to tie neckties as a teaching tool for mentoring. So those are things I'm proud of. Going to Morehouse, that's fine but I'm more excited about ways I can impact somebody's life so they can share something later on. I get a little egotistical now. I don't mind them saying, "Mr. Fulton taught me that," but those are the things that excite me. I mentioned earlier Johnnie Harper, when you grow up with men and you fight him, he beat me up too by the way, but when you see men grow up, we're 50, late 40s now and they're doing good things in the community, that makes me proud.

[51:00]

He's not the only one. There are a few others who played football with him. They're still around and doing things. There's another guy to talk to Woody Daniels. He played football with Douglas Langston and these guys started their own movements and in the business and I appreciate that and they live in Hyde Park and they're doing what they do to help and I'm sure there are many others. One guy I can't think of now, I can't think of his name but I'm proud of the fact that he has bounced back from some serious problems and he's living in the community. So those are things that make me proud.

Paris Westbrook: Do you have anything else you'd like to say about your community?

Daniel Saba: Anything you think should just be added to the record?

Paris Westbrook: Words of advice for young people like us? Anything?

Sylvester Fulton: Words of advice for young people; let me see you're headed for American University.

[52:00]

Okay. Value your days. Learn all you can. You're going to school. Both of you right? You're getting a liberal arts education. It's not all about a classroom or textbooks. When I was in school, one of my schools, I told you I did a lot of things. I was at UT Martin during that Iran situation, the hostage situation and at that time the Muslims on campus were standoffish. They were getting threats and people were wanting to fight. I walked in front of the student center and there was a video going about Iran or something and I stopped and one of the guys from that country said, "This is not our country," and I said, "Well tell me about your country." He's talking to me. I'm listening. I'm learning from him. He even told us what they tell us not to do for the black people in this country. So we're talking, we're learning. Around that same time I had a class with

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three Iranian women and they wore the black, you only saw their hair and their face, but one of them didn't and I thought it's raining outside and they had one umbrella and three women. So I'm thinking I got an umbrella, a golf umbrella, you know those golf things that are real big, like five feet. So I was loaned it to her and after that downpour wherever I was on campus they always wanted to speak as opposed to me standing off and talking bad to them. So to me that's part of liberal arts education. You just don't stay inside your discipline. You got outside. You talk to people. You meet people. Got to other schools and compare your curriculum to someone else's. Just talk to people. Just leave campus. Don't always associate with people on campus. Find somebody in the neighborhood that you can talk to about the neighborhood. One of the things, I watched a little bit several times, I think it was *School Daze*, a Spike Lee movie, there was a scene in that movie that's just so real

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where people come to a community and there's conflict with those that live there. Some people won't be able to leave the neighborhood around Fisk University. They were born there. They're gonna die there. Get to know those people. A tragedy is that there are kids around Fiske that live in the neighborhood who probably don't step off Fisk campus, who don't feel welcome. Same is true at American University. Some kids who would benefit a lot, they're not even doing it. There are so many things you can do with young people if you allow yourself not to be regulated to just one thing. That's my advice. Now you just graduated right? So what are you gonna do with your life? What you got next?

Female: That is the question.

Sylvester Fulton: Okay, well remain open-minded. Don't be afraid of nothing. Just think with a positive attitude. I believe that good things happen to people that think good.

[55:00]

So be positive. Be willing to reach back and help somebody. Remember, what's my favorite saying, I say all the time, when a man does only for himself and dies all that he has done died with him. What he's done for others remains and I think people value that. Another thing I say in life, Gandhi said this first, Gandhi stole it from me. He said worship without sacrifice is sin. Be willing to sacrifice yourselves. Take a chance. Take a chance on a young person. Take a chance on somebody different than you. I was at a cookout one night and there were all these intelligent people talking about the world and I'm talking about mentoring to save kids. I mentioned talking about the Lord save kids. Another guy said this save kids. One guy that had been a drug addict was just listening and he heard enough. He said, "Let me tell y'all something.

[56:00]

The thing that we need today is sacrifice. People don't sacrifice for each other." So my advice to you guys is don't be afraid to sacrifice. Don't always look for a return. You may not see it but I guarantee you somebody will benefit from it. That's all the advice I've got right there. Come back and get some more later. Be bold.

Be brave and you were talking about your mother, she talked about God, I know she did. Well that's okay too. Think with the mind of Christ. Be strong about it. Be open about it. Don't be afraid to go places. You're never gonna be alone. It may look like it sometimes but you're never alone. You guys in the black community right now, it ain't always pretty but I guarantee you you'll get a lot of respect. Take this experience with you some place. Your peers may not understand this. Somebody in your university may say, "You did what,"

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and you go say, "Hell yeah I did it. I'm going back next year and you gonna go with me." That works. You're from Michigan?

Paris Westbrook: Yes.

Sylvester Fulton: What city?

Paris Westbrook: Flint.

Sylvester Fulton: Flint? I never liked people from Flint. I'm just kidding. But you know, hey, take it back to Flint. Take it to Flint from Memphis.

Paris Westbrook: Will do, will do. Well on behalf of Crossroads of Freedom we would like to thank you for participating and allowing us to do this interview.

Daniel Saba: Thank you.

Sylvester Fulton: Alright. I enjoyed it.

[End of audio]