

Jordan Holland: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, I want to thank you for taking time to share your story with us today. I'm Jordan Holland, a graduate of Fisk University.

Pauletta Hughes: I'm Pauletta Hughes, a junior at Rhodes College.

Jordan Holland: And I'm honored to meet you and learn about your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. We could start by you just telling us your name.

Sally Hermsdorfer: I'm Sally Hermsdorfer.

Jordan Holland: And what year were you born?

Sally Hermsdorfer: 1948.

Jordan Holland: Where were you born and raised?

Sally Hermsdorfer: I was born and raised in Memphis, lived here almost all of my life.

Jordan Holland: Nice, and what is your occupation?

Sally Hermsdorfer: I am principal of Immaculate Conception High School in Memphis.

Jordan Holland: And tell us a little bit about your parents, their names, where they're from.

Sally Hermsdorfer: My parents were **Pete** and **Catherine Sarton**. My mom was born and raised in Jackson, Tennessee, and moved to Memphis with my dad right after World War II was over, around 1945. My dad was **Joseph Martin Sarton**, nicknamed Pete. He was born in South Pittsburg, Tennessee in 1911.

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He was a child of the only Catholic family in South Pittsburg, was raised pretty much by the only Jewish family in South Pittsburg, and from my dad, all of us kids got a real appreciation for what it's like to be the outsider and the underdog. It made a big impression on us.

Jordan Holland: Awesome. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Sally Hermsdorfer: I am the third of five children.

Jordan Holland: Oh, and who are they and what do they do?

Sally Hermsdorfer: My oldest sister is **Marie Sarton Looney**. She is a retired schoolteacher. She's married and lives in Hernando, Mississippi. My next oldest sister, **Cathy**, is now Sister **Marianne**. She's a Catholic religious sister living in Nashville, Tennessee. I'm in the middle. My next younger sister, **Jenny**, she is **Jenny Alexander** now, she is married to a thoracic surgeon in Batesville, Arkansas, and my baby brother, Pete, is Archbishop for the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Seattle, Washington.

Jordan Holland: Awesome. That's awesome. Can you tell us about the neighborhood and where you grew up as a child?

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Sally Hermsdorfer: The first home that I remember, actually the home that my parents brought me home from the hospital to, was on Fountain Court in South Memphis, very close to the intersection of McLemore and Bellevue, and we lived there until I was eight years old. At that point, my parents just needed a bigger house and moved out to the Whitehaven suburb of Memphis. We moved out there I think in 1958. I was nine or ten years old, and my mom lived there until she died in 19 – no, excuse me, my mom died in 2005, and my husband and I still live in the Whitehaven section of Memphis.

Pauletta Hughes: What was the city of Memphis like when you were a child?

Sally Hermsdorfer: Well, I think everybody remembers their hometown as being just glorious and wonderful. We loved everything about Memphis. The street that I was raised on had a big court down the middle, like a tree lawn, I guess, is what they would call it if we had lived in the north, and all of us kids played on the court.

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I had a ready-made bunch of playmates in my family because there were five of us together, but there were a lot of kids on our street, and I remember happy times walking to the grocery store with my mom. The neighborhood grocery store had teenage kids that they would hire to put your groceries into a big bicycle basket. So, my mom would walk down there with all of us, the grocery store would deliver all of her groceries, she never had to carry anything, and the teenage kids that did that worked for tips. My mom would go shopping about once a month with her girlfriends in downtown Memphis. It was a very big deal. We always knew she was going shopping because she put on a suit and heels and carried her purse, and my mother had a habit, when she put on her lipstick, she would rub the lipstick on her lips with her pinky finger. So,

whenever we saw my mom with lipstick on her pinky finger, we knew that she was going shopping and we were gonna be with the babysitter that afternoon.

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I remember it being just a really, really happy place. Memphis, of course, was segregated back in those days, and the few times that I remember my mom taking me downtown with her, I was always curious as to why there was a white entrance and a colored entrance to places like Goldsmith's and Lowenstein's. The restrooms were separate, the water fountains were separate, and I remember when I was maybe five, I went to take a drink out of the colored water fountain to see what the water for black people tasted like, and was really surprised that it wasn't very different. And then, a lady who was working I guess it was the glove counter or whatever at Goldsmith's, came out and said, "No," I must not touch that water fountain, that was not for me, and I guess that was the first time I experienced segregation in Memphis.

Pauletta Hughes: So, you mentioned that, of course, Memphis was segregated. Was the suburb of Whitehaven segregated at that time, also?

Sally Hermsdorfer: At the time when we moved into Whitehaven, I don't remember that it was.

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We went to Saint Paul School, and I know that there were some African-American children at Saint Paul but not very many. So, I am assuming that they were neighborhood kids. The parish school that we went to was a neighborhood parish, but my playmates were, by in large, Caucasian children when I was a kid.

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Pauletta Hughes: Okay. Just to switch gears a little, I would like to ask you what were the Cotton Carnival and the Cotton Makers' Jubilee like when you were a child?

Sally Hermsdorfer: Actually, I was never allowed to attend Cotton Carnival. My parents did not approve of Cotton Carnival, and I'm not really sure totally where that came from. I remember my dad explaining to me, and not in the context of Cotton Carnival – my dad loved history and he talked to us a lot about history, and he used to tell me that wealthy people in Memphis who had inherited cotton money had inherited money that was earned off the backs of

slaves, and he said, "I just don't know whether you should ever be able to enjoy money that you inherited off the backs of slaves."

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Cotton Carnival, from my memory as very much an outsider, was for the rich families, and I think I wrote you, when you first asked me for reminiscences, the Cotton Carnival news was all over the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* when I was a kid. I can remember that it was played up with as much publicity for the Maid of Cotton and the Cotton Carnival Queen, and all of the duchesses and all of those types of people; they were always from the old cotton families. I think you had to be related somehow to old cotton before you could even get one of those positions, and their portraits in their costumes would be – if you can imagine folding out an entire sheet of newspaper, and the picture of the duchess or the queen would be that entire sheet of newspaper in her robe with her scepter.

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You could always tell when my mom disapproved of something because she would go, "Eh!" or, "Psssh!" and it was just obvious to us, "This doesn't matter in our house." If there is something that is the opposite of mattering, that's what Cotton Carnival was to us. Cotton Makers' Jubilee, I don't remember ever having even heard of until I was in high school because we didn't take part in Cotton Carnival. We weren't allowed to go to the midway. We went to the parade one year because one of my sisters was on a float, and if it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't have gotten to go that year.

Pauletta Hughes: Speaking of your sister being on a float, it was your sister, **Cathy**?

Sally Hermsdorfer: It was my sister who is now a nun. Yes.

Pauletta Hughes: Can you walk us through that evening?

Sally Hermsdorfer: Well, I can walk you through. She was seven years old. I e-mailed her last week to help straighten me out on the details. She was seven, which would have made me five, we were that far apart, so what I remember from that is really fuzzy.

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She filled in some details for me. All of the elementary schools in Memphis were invited to put a float in the parade. We went to Saint Thomas Elementary, and she was friends of another little girl. Cathy told me she thought she got picked because she was a

very dark-haired girl, and her best friend was a very blond-haired girl, and evidently the people at the school used to go, "Oh, look at them. Aren't they cute together?" because they kind of looked like opposites of each other, and they played jump rope. So, Saint Thomas' float was called Jump Rope, and Cathy and Adrienne, her friend, had little organdy dresses and little organdy pinafores, and got to ride on the float and wave at everybody that passed by. What I remember of that, my mom made the dress, which was pink with a white ruffled pinafore. I was absolutely jealous of this dress, which Cathy got to keep because my mother had made it, and she wore it to church all of that summer, and evidently it made me really, really angry.

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Cathy said what she remembers is that Mom and Daddy had to take her to a rendezvous point, where all of the children on all of the floats were picked up by a school bus, and Cathy had to get on the school bus. And she didn't know any of the other children except her friend, Adrienne, and she remembers that they gave them Kool-Aid and pimento cheese sandwiches. That was her big memory of that. Yeah, I made the same face when she said that. The parade, as I remember, used to go down Main Street, from either the north end to the south end, or vice versa, and Cathy said she remembered it took maybe an hour or an hour and a half, and she and Adrienne were told, "No matter what happens, keep smiling and wave at people." I don't remember being there. My dad had Super 8 movies that he took of that parade, and, later on, my brother had all of my dad's old movies spliced and put on a videotape, and I really did look for the videotape but I can't find that anywhere.

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But I remember seeing at least the movie, where you could see my sister just doing the little Miss America wave to people, and my nose was totally out of joint because Cathy got picked and I didn't get picked, and that is the sum total of my memory of that. As I said, we never again went to the Cotton Carnival parade. I couldn't tell you for sure that I was there that day, or whether I just remember seeing the movie. I was too little, and we never went back again because, as I said, it was not something my parents placed a value on.

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Pauletta Hughes: You mentioned being married _____ [inaudible] – how did that affect your relationship with the Cotton Carnival, especially when you had children? Did you impart the same –

Sally Hermsdorfer: By the time I had kids, Cotton Carnival was not the same big deal thing that it used to be.

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I suppose if you were Memphis society back in the '50s and in the early '60s, you were nobody if you weren't in Cotton Carnival. By the time I was a young working woman, it had gotten to where, at least with the kids I ran around with, it was something people kind of smirked at, "Oh yeah, the rich people are doing Cotton Carnival," you know, that type of thing. I worked with a man who had dated one of the girls who was one of the Cotton Carnival duchesses or princesses, or whatever, and I remember him telling me that by the end of Carnival week, he was exhausted, she was exhausted, and she kept saying things like, "I can't believe we've got another stupid party we've gotta go to." So, evidently, the luster had kind of worn off. The full-page pictures very definitely disappeared from the *Commercial Appeal*, the Maid of Cotton contest, which, when we were children, was to us like Miss America, and even though my mom didn't like it, we watched it on television. I don't remember seeing that on television by the time I was a college girl, and it was just an absolute non-issue when I was raising kids.

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My kids never expressed interest in going, it never occurred to me, "Well, this is a part of my childhood, so I want it to be a part of your childhood," because it wasn't a part of my childhood. So, it was an absolutely non-starter. We just didn't do it. It's not the kind of thing; though, I would have wanted my own kids to aspire to. I didn't marry money, we didn't value money in that way, we didn't value getting our pictures in the society pages. That was something I learned from my parents, so it was not something I passed on to my kids because it didn't matter to me.

Jordan Holland: If I may interject, you mentioned Maid of Cotton was like the Miss America. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Sally Hermsdorfer: I will tell you what I remember.

Jordan Holland: Okay.

Sally Hermsdorfer: The Maid of Cotton was regional, like a beauty contest. As I recall, you had to be a college-age young woman from a cotton-growing state, and I guess those would basically be the states of the Confederacy, although it was never phrased as such.

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The Maid of Cotton pageant, I believe, was held at the Peabody. I don't remember that. I know the preliminaries were broadcast on daytime television on Channel 3, and it was a little interview thing where there would be a fashion show, and the girl would come out in a daytime ensemble that had to be made of cotton, and then an evening ensemble that had to be made of cotton, and she had to do the kinds of questions they do at the interview part of Miss America, "What do you see your role would be as Maid of Cotton?" They were judged on their poise and their ability to keep a conversation going, that sort of thing. And of course, the little girls, there were four of us girls in the house, and we watched that and watched all the interviews and picked which one was our favorite. And that was another thing, my mom would come in to see what we were watching on TV, and she would go, "Psssh!" We knew she did not approve of that, but she never said, "Turn that off," but she never said, "Oh, that's so interesting. Let me come and sit down with you."

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We knew that that was kind of like way down on my mom's priority list. Then, the actual crowning of the Maid of Cotton would be at night at a night event **on the** Peabody, and then the opening of Cotton Carnival, these people would all get on a big barge that was festooned and decorated up somewhere north of Memphis, and then they would come downriver. There would be fireworks and all sorts of lighting, and all these people in their royal robes and the Maid of Cotton in her evening gown doing the Miss America wave, and they would land at the foot of Beale Street. People in Memphis would come down because they would get off the barge – I was never allowed to go, so I'm telling you what I heard other people say – and they would throw chocolate coins or beads, I don't know what it was they threw, but it seemed to me like all of my friends from grade school got to go watch the barge come in.

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It was the big, big deal the first week of May to watch the barge come in, and to go line up on the cobblestones and to blow kisses

at the queen, and I remember my folks saying, "She is not your queen. There is not a queen in this country. There is no royalty in this country. You are not going down there." After a while, you quit asking. You know you're just not gonna do that. But when I was seven or eight or nine years old, I would have given my eyeteeth just to be able to go and be there for that glamorous night. And I told Pauletta, because we lived in South Memphis, we had a one-story house in a neighborhood where a lot of the houses were two-story boardinghouses, and several of the kids in our neighborhood said, "We're gonna go sit on Miss So-and-So's back porch, because you can see the fireworks," and my father would not even let us go down to Miss So-and-So's back porch to watch the fireworks because that was not for us, that was not part of who we were; we just weren't gonna do that. So, I guess I was raised in kind of an un-Cotton Carnival household.

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Pauletta Hughes: You said your father was very big on history, and I know that you are a former history teacher. Would you say that the Cotton Carnival is a celebration of cotton?

Sally Hermsdorfer: I will tell you that the Cotton Carnival always seemed to me not so much a celebration of cotton as a celebration of money, and most of the money in Memphis when I was a kid was cotton money. The **Norfleet's** and the **Condin's**, and all of those people who had gone back to pre-Civil War days, they were the names that you saw in the paper over and over again, and I wrote to you – and I think this is true – I think the Cotton Carnival was as much about race and class as it was about anything. And when I found out about the Cotton Makers' Jubilee, that probably was one of the things that my dad had against the Cotton Carnival, because the Cotton Carnival was for the white folk, and the Cotton Makers' Jubilee was for the black folk, and it was held around Beale Street.

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And I think you can call that a celebration of **African-America's** contribution of cotton all you want to, but what it's about is that the descendants of the slaves are up here, and the descendants of the slave owners are down here, and those two groups are not gonna mix at this celebration. I could be totally wrong, you could possibly interview somebody from an old cotton family who would say, "No, it was a very important part of our heritage," and maybe what you're hearing from me is a kid who never got over being an

outsider to all of that. But it just appalled me when I learned about what the Cotton Makers' Jubilee was about, and I was like, "Seriously? The city really made them do that? Seriously? Y'all are gonna celebrate the fact that this is how it used to have to be?"

Pauletta Hughes: Having been a lifetime Memphian and a history teacher, how would you assess the importance of the Cotton Carnival for Memphis?

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Sally Hermsdorfer: I think the Cotton Carnival gave us, eventually, Memphis in May. I don't know that, never sat in on any of those meetings, but evidently, as the two celebrations, they began to ebb in popularity as – I think it's the Center City Commission that puts Memphis in May together, and I think it was a really smart move on their part to downplay the cotton plantation owners versus the cotton slave workers' role, and to bring the entire community together in Memphis in May, which is, to me, a much better celebration. We probably wouldn't have had **the one**. We do have a lovely riverfront. It just kind of begs for some big party to be held down there when spring weather finally comes. I'm glad we have what we have now. I haven't kept up with Cotton Carnival. Cotton Carnival now, I believe, is just called Carnival. Am I right about that? Yeah, and the fact that whoever gets that celebration together one year very discreetly dropped the word Cotton, to me, that's a very telling thing, that they don't want to play up the heritage of the plantation.

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We are so far past that as a city, and if we're not, we need to be, and I think the people who pulled all those celebrations together began to realize, "There's more to Memphis than this."

Jordan Holland: You mentioned that they began to downplay the Cotton Carnival and the Cotton Makers' Jubilee. Is that when they began to also integrate and become one, or were they just still separate entities?

Sally Hermsdorfer: You could tell me the answer to that better. This community, and I love this community, this community is as yet still, I don't think, fully integrated. It's so much more racially diverse and so much more open than when I was a kid. I think that when they downplayed the Cotton Carnival and the Jubilee and began to make the bigger celebration was probably the result of – change always comes from young people.

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I'm guessing it was younger city leaders going, "Guys, it's time. We're just gonna do this, and you can hate it all you want to, but we're gonna do it," and there was probably a year of grumbling. I don't know. Like I said, I never sat on any of those committees, never went to any of those meetings, never wanted to be a part of that. That's just how it seems to me, when you look at all the trappings of Carnival as it evolved.

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Pauletta Hughes: I have a question pertaining to you as an outsider. I don't want to say it seems weird, but your father, his childhood, obviously he experienced being an outsider based on a religious aspect, so how do you think that affected your childhood, your coming into adulthood and now?

Sally Hermsdorfer: It was a profound effect on us. When our neighborhood in South Memphis was first integrated, several of the people in the neighborhood brought what I have come to learn was a neighborhood covenant.

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This would have been about 1957 or 1958, and they wanted to get all the homeowners in the neighborhood to sign this covenant to agree not ever to sell their property to black people, and I remember my dad throwing that man out. My dad was not a man to get angry, but whoever that man was that brought that piece of paper, my mom shooed us into the back of the house, because I think my mom knew that my dad was getting ready to be very, very angry, and he literally got the guy up, grabbed his elbow, and walked him to the door and said, "No, you're not gonna do that in my house. I am never gonna sign a document like that." And when the first black families moved into our neighborhood, I gather that a lot of the neighbors probably weren't as welcoming as they could be, and my father made a point of telling us, "If you see those children in the yard, you are gonna play with those children. We are not going to exclude a family from anything that we do. You will never refuse anybody entry into our yard," and he kept saying, "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

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My father had an awful lot of black friends, and I don't suppose my father would have minded me telling you this, my father was in AA for all of his adult life, and he knew an awful lot of black people, and white people both, through AA, and we had a lot of

AA friends over at his house. He always wanted, no matter who it was, "You're gonna come in and talk, you're gonna introduce yourselves, you're gonna say, 'Hello, sir,' whoever it is." That was just a value in my household, and we were just always told that, "The world is not gonna go out of their way to make the kind of decisions I want my daughters and son to make, but you guys are gonna do this. Do you understand me? This is part of being polite. This is what you are gonna do."

Pauletta Hughes: Well, thank you for your –

Sally Hermsdorfer: You probably got a whole lot more than you asked for.

Jordan Holland: That was awesome.

Pauletta Hughes: Yeah, it was.

Jordan Holland: Actually, I do have a few more questions. I know you weren't involved much in the carnivals, but during that time did you have African-American friends who were possibly involved or did anything? Do you know how they felt, or was that ever a discussion?

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Sally Hermsdorfer: No. You know, the first really close, call-up-on-the-phone, go-out-to-the-mall-with friend that I had when I was allowed to go out to the mall with friends when I was in high school was a black girl named **Yvonne Hartaway**, and she, like me, was pretty much an outsider. I don't think her parents approved of all that. I don't ever remember having a conversation with Yvonne specifically about this whole Cotton Carnival thing. By the time I was 15, I knew better than to ask my mom, "Can I go?" because that was a dead letter every year of the world. But we were raised, and Yvonne was raised – I think that's one of the reasons why she and I got to be good friends – that it's not who you descended from that matters, it's what you're gonna make of yourself, so we just didn't get all involved in, "Well, my great-grandfather was from the blah-blah family that owned the blah-blah land over wherever." My dad's people had been sharecroppers in East Tennessee, and my mom's people were Irish immigrants, and we didn't come from money, so all of that kind of stuff just seemed really stupid to us.

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Jordan Holland: So, now that Memphis, I will say, has progressed, do you still feel that at times Memphis is still about the money and still about Caucasians and who has the money?

Sally Hermsdorfer: Let me ask you a question. Do you ever get the impression that it's not about the money?

[Laughter]

Jordan Holland: Well, I'm not from here, but –

Sally Hermsdorfer: Oh, okay.

Jordan Holland: – I've learned an immense amount, and I learned that before and back in the day, it was about money and who had status, and whatnot –

Sally Hermsdorfer: Yeah.

Jordan Holland: – and I just wanted to know have we moved past that, or has Memphis moved past that or are we still there? Are we trying to progress?

Sally Hermsdorfer: I don't think Memphis is any different from America. One of my history professors in college made the point with me that you can look at American popular culture and realize that when we overthrew royalty in 1776, we had to have something to substitute for it, and America has created royalty, and the American royalty are, by in large, moneyed people.

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We are a culture that admires success, and the way we define success is, "What do you drive, where do you live –

Jordan Holland: Very true.

Sally Hermsdorfer: – and what designer are you wearing?"

Jordan Holland: Very true.

Sally Hermsdorfer: And I think even all of the immigrants' subcultures in this country have bought into that, you know? I see it to a certain extent in me, I see it in my children, whom we decidedly tried not to raise that way, but everybody about you is like, you know – when my oldest daughter came home and said, "I need Nikes," instead of, "I need some tennis shoes," I thought, "Really? You're 11 years old. Really? You're gonna do this?" But it happens. It's part of what we do.

Jordan Holland: It happens, **I guess.**

Sally Hermsdorfer: We watch the Oscars, and the first question they ask a movie starlet is, "Who are you wearing tonight?"

Jordan Holland: Exactly.

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Sally Hermsdorfer: Exactly. We miss royalty, and I think that there's just something about American culture, because we are a capitalist culture, capitalism equates wealth with doing well, with success. The work ethic of most of the people that were the founding fathers equates material success with virtue, and I don't think we've ever lost that out of our culture.

Jordan Holland: ~~_____.~~ I'd just say: Wow!:- That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story.

Sally Hermsdorfer: This has been fun.

Jordan Holland: You have given us a lot of information, and we thoroughly enjoyed it. So, on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, myself and Pauletta, thank you so much for doing the interview.

Sally Hermsdorfer: This has just been fun. I'm glad you called and asked me to do it. Thank you.

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