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*Malishia Smith:* On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and Knowledge Quiz I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Malishia Smith.

*Tretarius McCain:* And I'm **Tretarius** McCain.

*Malishia Smith:* And we're honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom web site. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record? What is your name?

*Walter Gates:* My name is Walter **Lewis** Gates.

*Malishia Smith:* Okay. If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

*Walter Gates:* Now that's a stretch. I was born in 1947.

*Malishia Smith:* Where were you born and raised?

*Walter Gates:* I was born and raised in a little town called Millington, Tennessee.

*Malishia Smith:* All right. What is your occupation?

*Walter Gates:* What was?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes, what was your occupation?

*Walter Gates:* My occupation was industrial maintenance.

*Malishia Smith:* Can you tell me a little more about that?

*Walter Gates:* Hmm?

*Malishia Smith:* Can you tell me a little more about that?

*Walter Gates:* Industrial maintenance?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes sir.

*Walter Gates:* Industrial maintenance is –

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We keep the plant running. That's our job. We fix the machines, whatever machine gets broken and stuff like that. And I did that for 15 years. And after that kind of played out I got into construction work. And I did the last 15-20 years in construction work, building houses and such.

*Malishia Smith:* Are you or were you ever married?

*Walter Gates:* No and no – never will be.

*Malishia Smith:* Now let's talk a little more about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

*Walter Gates:* The neighborhood that I grew up in?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes.

*Walter Gates:* I grew up in the country. So it wasn't a neighborhood per se because actually the houses were two, three, or four miles apart –

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you know? So it wouldn't be a neighborhood as you would think it is – or as you would know it to be today. In my growing up I grew up on a farm in a rural area without electricity. Now that's something that you wouldn't understand. You all possibly couldn't understand. Probably I was one of the last generations of those people – What they called it – It was a thing that went on at that time.

They called it sharecropping and I was the last generation of that.

*Malishia Smith:* So what age did you come to South Memphis?

*Walter Gates:* What age?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes.

*Walter Gates:* I came to South Memphis when I was old – 45 maybe – 45 and I had to live around in that area until I moved to Memphis.

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*Malishia Smith:* Who were your parents and what were they like?

*Walter Gates:* My parents – My father was – My mother – My father wasn't in the house. I was raised by a single parent, which was my mother. And she was a sweet and an endearing person really and probably one of the sweetest most endearing people that I've ever met. And she was – Well you know we were raised under a system that would probably – that your generation would have a problem with in that we were raised under a system of what I called absolutely authority.

Parents had all the authority. Kids had no voice. And that –

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sort of affects me to this day really.

*Malishia Smith:* So what type of schools did you attend?

*Walter Gates:* Public schools. I attended public schools until I was in the eighth grade? Ninth grade? Tenth grade. Then I went to private school and I finished in private school.

*Malishia Smith:* Can you name those schools?

*Walter Gates:* Huh?

*Malishia Smith:* Can you name those schools?

*Walter Gates:* Those schools?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes.

*Walter Gates:* I started out in E.A. Harrold in 1953. And I went there for what? Eight or nine years. And I went to another school 'cause back then you had – It was just high school – Jr. High. They had Jr. High then. And I went to Jr. High at E.A. Harrold School.

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And after you graduate from Jr. High you started going to high school which was Woodstock – Woodstock Training School. And I had a passion for playing football so I went to \_\_\_\_\_ to play football.

*Malishia Smith:* What was school like for you?

*Walter Gates:* It was hard. *[laughter]* No it was – School was school. You know school is school. And some of the associations that you make in school sort of last you a lifetime – some of them. And some of them kind of die out. What school was like? It was okay in that I grew up around people that liked people. We were all farmers. You know what I'm saying. So we all had the same basic backgrounds. Therefore we were probably a bit closer from that experience of having the same backgrounds.

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*Malishia Smith:* So did integration or segregation impact your education experiences?

*Walter Gates:* Did integration?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes.

*Walter Gates:* I never went to an integrated school. I always went to segregated schools when I was growing up. See that question would kind of – because I never went to integrated schools so that didn't affect me one way or the other – because I didn't have that experience.

*Malishia Smith:* What church or churches did you attend?

*Walter Gates:* We called it Upper Canaan. It was a little old small church – a little country church with no heat, no air, just electricity. You know we didn't have fans and stuff like that.

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It was kind of hard on us really.

*Malishia Smith:* Can you share some of your memories from your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

*Walter Gates:* Some of the things?

*Malishia Smith:* Yes.

*Walter Gates:* Some of the things? It probably would be the work ethics. I think that would be more effective because then we were required to work. I started working when I was what? Five-years-old I had my first job. And my job was to have – we called it kindling – the little small wood that you could start a fire with. And that was my job – to pick up the little sticks and stuff. Get it in and set it in a

little bin beside the fire place where my brother could start a fire the next morning.

Those experiences were varied really. And it taught you work ethics –

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because even to this day I still do the same things. I get up at 4:30 AM or 5:00 AM every morning. I've been doing that all my life basically. So it affected me that way.

*Tretarius McCain:* Let's talk about how life in South Memphis used to be. What does South Memphis mean to you?

*Walter Gates:* What does it mean? It means home at this point – home. And when you say home you want all of the things that make a home possible. The cohesiveness – you know living near the action with other people and stuff like that. Memphis tries to make it as easy as possible.

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*Tretarius McCain:* Were the people in South Memphis different from when you came here than they are now?

*Walter Gates:* Sure, sure.

*Tretarius McCain:* Could you elaborate?

*Walter Gates:* In the '60's in South Memphis it was more connections. We had more – We cared, it seems, for our neighbors a little bit better in that – In the '60's in South Memphis you could – My sister was out of town and shoot we could – She left the back door open and then we could just go in and out of the back door – in and out. Nobody would break in and stuff like that. It wasn't as bad. The crime wasn't as bad in those times. People were a lot more easy going than they are now. For what reason I don't know.

I can't answer that question.

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It could be in the water. I don't know.

*Tretarius McCain:* Where have been some of your favorite places in South Memphis?

*Walter Gates:* My favorite place in South Memphis? Sitting on these porches man, and the freedom, you know that – And that I have never been a person that would go to a lot of public places, but just interacting with people. Sometimes before I started working at Knowledge Quest I would sit on the porch and talk all day long to people. They'd come up and we got a conversation going okay?

*Tretarius McCain:* With the new renovations in South Memphis like College Park are you hopeful about the future of South Memphis?

*Walter Gates:* Sure, sure. I'm really, really hopeful – really hopeful. I am hopeful simply because of –

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the fact that sitting here and talking to you young people and seeing that hope – because actually you all are our hope for our future you know. And seeing that the way you're asking these questions man and seeing – You know what I'm saying? That is the hope. And then you're seeing that some of the things that Mr. Foster is doing. I'm just seeing now – I'm just seeing now the work and effort that he's putting in.

I'm just seeing it just now becoming – the plant now is getting just above the ground. And it's so sturdy and good. It's looking good.

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It's really looking good. Being a gardener I have to use that.

*Tretarius McCain:* How would you compare living in Millington to living in Memphis?

*Walter Gates:* A world of difference – a world of difference. Because let me tell you when I was living in Millington then I was isolated. And here every time I walk out I see my neighbors or somebody. There you walk out and you might see somebody every blue moon. And everybody in the country is more friendly. You can – You have a little bit more freedom. Because here you have to be slightly – You have to be watchful. That's the way it is. You have to be watchful here.

There it's a little bit more relaxed simply because of the fact –

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I'm not saying that the people are better but the situation is.

*Tretarius McCain:* Is there any advice that you would want young people living in South Memphis to know?

*Walter Gates:* Sure, sure, sure. I would say – if I could say – that put forward an effort to get you a good education. And when you do that a lot of times you – If you get a good education or put yourself in a position to get yourself a –

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or to put yourself in a position to get yourself a good job – you know what I'm saying? And don't be ashamed to attend church. You know what I'm saying? Because churches are a good thing for young people. You know what I'm saying?

And then keep your focus. Keep your focus because there is so much destruction out here. So once you align yourself to your goal keep your focus. That's what I – sure.

*Tretarius McCain:* Well thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

*Walter Gates:* Mm-hmm. And we cross over to freedom we'll have another conversation.

*Tretarius McCain:* Could you tell us a little about your involvement with the Community Garden?

*Walter Gates:* Yes, yes. That actually –

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You're getting me now to pour my heart out because gardening is my heart and it's my passion. And getting involved with Mr. Foster and the Community Garden Program is probably one of the best things that probably has ever happened to me. I've always been interested in eating healthy. And I've always been interested in healthy foods. So when the opportunity came – So I have an opportunity now, not just to grow stuff because before I was involved with the Community Garden I always grew me a garden for myself.

And I always ate out of my garden – all of my vegetables because I don't –

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eat vegetables out of the store. I try not to. I try not to you know because they're filled with so much, so much, so much pesticides, herbicides – man, all kinds of cides – you know. [laughter] And most of those are not good for you. So getting involved in this place, we have an opportunity now to raise the community consciousness of healthy foods. And there are a couple of – two or three older people that I give plants to.

And they take it and put it in their little flower beds or whatever. That way – And also we're trying to expand the experience of community garden. And actually if you take our little place and I think that we epitomize –

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what a community garden is supposed to be because we have a system where we have people that come in and help us. And then we give away – We give away something like 40 percent of what we raise. You know what I'm saying.

So that in and of itself is helping or expanding help because actually you are what you eat. So if you eat healthy more than likely you're going to be healthy. That experience – and not only that, we iterate kids into the garden. And those kids – a lot of them never knew where produce came from.

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So that's – To see the enlightenment of kids in their discoveries; that in and of itself probably would be good enough for pay but then – you know. [laughter]

But no, no. I have to be me okay? But anyway probably one of the best things that ever happened to me was community gardening. And we're in the process of expanding the consciousness of community gardening. A.B. Hill School; we've got them started off. We've got a little church over here named Monumental Baptist. They got started. What else?

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Also I belong to the \_\_\_\_\_ Gardening Committee. And what we do there is we're trying to get schools and churches in this zip code the gardening experience.

We're trying to get many, many, as many people as possible. I call it getting them dirty because working in the garden is dirty work. But anyway –

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