
Tretarius McCain: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and Knowledge Quest, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I am **Tretarius McCain**.

Cameron Jones: And I am **Cameron Jones**.

Tretarius McCain: And I am honored to meet you and learn your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record? What is your name?

Sarah Williams: Speak a little louder because my hearing is a little bit low.

Tretarius McCain: What is your name?

Sarah Williams: My name is **Sarah Jane Williams**.

Tretarius McCain: If you don't mind me asking what year were you born?

Sarah Williams: I was born in 1914.

Tretarius McCain: Where were you born and raised?

Sarah Williams: Where was I born?

Tretarius McCain: Yes, ma'am.

Sarah Williams: Robinsonville, Mississippi.

Tretarius McCain: And you were raised there as well?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Tretarius McCain: And you were raised there as well?

Sarah Williams: Say was I what?

Tretarius McCain: Were you raised there as well?

Sarah Williams: No, no, no, I left Robinsonville when I was six months old.

Tretarius McCain: Could you tell us where you went to and where you were raised?

Sarah Williams: I came to Memphis, Tennessee with my mother and my dad.

Tretarius McCain: What is -- what was -- your occupation?

Sarah Williams: What was my occupation?

Tretarius McCain: Yes, ma'am.

Sarah Williams: I didn't really start working [*laughter*] until I was kind of up in age and I worked at Memphis Cotton **Sills** on Bartley, in South Memphis.

Tretarius McCain: Are you or were you ever married?

Sarah Williams: I did I what?

Tretarius McCain: Are you or were you ever married?

Sarah Williams: Was I ever married? Yeah, I was married twice. My first husband was named **Edward Finney** and he passed away and then I married **Albert Williams** and that's why I'm a Williams.

Tretarius McCain: What was your husband's occupation?

[00:01:59]

Sarah Williams: He was a cleaner. He worked at the Bristol Cleaner on Summer Avenue.

Tretarius McCain: Do you have any children?

Sarah Williams: Yes, I had two girls. They both are gone. They passed on and one passed at 5 years old and the other one passed at 23.

Tretarius McCain: Now let's talk a little about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Sarah Williams: Well the neighborhood I really grew up in was on Exchange right off of Poplar, the next street behind Poplar, which was later a project but the street I grew up on was very nice. When I was growing up everything was real nice. They didn't have **no** break-ins and stealing and people was afraid to go at night, you could go anywhere you wanna go. At night young women, men, whathaveyou, no one bothered you if they didn't take time to bring you home if you needed a ride. That was just it.

Nobody bothered **nobody**.

Tretarius McCain: What was your life like at home?

Sarah Williams: What was my life like? My life was good. I had a sweet mother. I mostly grew up on the step-parents, my step-daddy's – and she always told him that if I do anything to let her know that she didn't want anybody to whip me but her because she loved me and she knew that I was a good child. She didn't ever let **nobody** whip me and I didn't need any whipping.

Tretarius McCain: Who were your parents?

Sarah Williams: **Annie Whittington** was my mother by her maiden name and her married name was **Whitfield**.

Tretarius McCain: And could you describe what she was like?

Sarah Williams: My real father?

Tretarius McCain: Your mother.

Sarah Williams: Well I never lived with my real father. My real father was **James White**.

[00:03:58]

Sarah Williams: I was a White before I married and I never lived with my father but I grew up around my father because my father people and my people were all neighbors in Mississippi, in Robinsonville, then they moved to Old Mississippi and they were still all neighbors and friends.

Tretarius McCain: Where did you go to elementary school?

Sarah Williams: Memphis. I went to Clay Street, which is an old-time school. After it turned from a school it got to be a broom factory over there by **Patterson's Church**, **G.E. Patterson's Church** and the later years, like I said, it was a broom factory and then I left there when mother moved to North Memphis. I went to **Corns Avenue School**.

Tretarius McCain: Where did you go to middle school and high school?

Sarah Williams: Well I went to high school for a minute and then I got pregnant, which was Booker T.

Tretarius McCain: What was school like for you?

Sarah Williams: Well school was good. I enjoyed it. I skipped. I went to Hyde Park School was one of the schools I went to, too. I went to Hyde Park School and that's where my great-grandmother lived then I lived with her a while and I went to Hyde Park School and then, I after I left Hyde Park, then I come back downtown with my mother.

Tretarius McCain: How did segregation impact your education?

Sarah Williams: Well segregation it was fine because I never did regard segregation. I always kind of spoke up for myself and I never thought about our being segregated because I always was a person would speak up for myself and I never had no problem with it.

CUT 1 – begin segment 2

[00:06:07]

Tretarius McCain: What church or churches have you attended?

Sarah Williams: Huh?

Tretarius McCain: What church or churches have you attended?

Sarah Williams: I didn't get the last word.

Tretarius McCain: What church [crosstalk] --?

Sarah Williams: What church?

Tretarius McCain: or churches?

Sarah Williams: Well my first church I was about eight years old when I professed ___ Christ was Antioch, which was in Kentucky and when I moved to Memphis I attend Mt. Moriah as a young person but when I become a young adult, around maybe like 20 or 21 years old I joined this church and I've been here ever since.

Tretarius McCain: Can you describe this church?

Sarah Williams: Huh?

Tretarius McCain: Can you describe this church?

Sarah Williams: Well I'd describe it as a beautiful, beautiful place. This church wasn't here when I first joined. It was a little wooden church and

we built this church. I was in the building of this church and we held service over in the Mason Temple 'til we got this church built. When we got this church built then we marched up on Mason Temple over here, over to this church one Sunday morning and when we got to the steps out front, the contractor gave Reverend **HR Jux**, which was the first pastor of the new church, Jenkins was the founder of the church but Reverend Jux was the builder of this church and the contractor gave him the keys to this church and the deeds. When we moved into this church we didn't owe one penny, we didn't owe nothing. It was a paid-for church and everybody come in the church and we shouted and shouted and enjoyed ourselves and we **was** the first black church in Memphis who had air conditioning.

[00:08:11]

Tretarius McCain: What kind of activities were you involved in coming up?

Sarah Williams: In this church? I first was **a** usher and next – my mother was an usher, too – was a Sunday she served I didn't serve and the next Sundays I would serve and then, after that, I got to be in the choir. Now the first pastor we had, you couldn't hold two offices. You either had to be one or the other. You were either a usher or you were a choir member so when I got off the usher boat and I joined the choir and then I served in the choir until my boys went to – I had the flu and I lost my voice for singing and then I gave up the choir and then I just because I was pretty well old woman anyway so I just didn't serve anymore in the choir.

Tretarius McCain: Can you share some of the memories from your children that later influenced your life?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Tretarius McCain: Can you share some of your memories from your children that influenced your life?

Sarah Williams: Can I say about how some of the members **was** of the church?

Tretarius McCain: Memories. Can you tell us some of your childhood memories?

Sarah Williams: Can I tell you something about my retiring? I'm don't – I'm sorry I don't understand the (muffled). What are you saying?

Tretarius McCain: Can you share some of the memories from your children that later influenced your life?

Sarah Williams: Oh, some of the memories I spent it in the rural because all my parents and my grandparents and my great-grandparents, they all lived in the country.

[00:10:04]

Sarah Williams: They lived right down in **Baldwyn**, Mississippi is where they were and I would always – when school was out up here mother would let me -- go to the country and stay until school start and then I enjoyed being there. I enjoyed because they had the cows and the hogs and chickens and whathaveyou and my grandmother, she would always get fresh vegetables from the garden and my aunt, she would milk the cows and we had fresh milk, buttermilk and everything and it was just fun to me and I enjoyed and it we would go fishing. When they would lay by the crops they would go fishing and I enjoyed that.

Tretarius McCain: What does South Memphis mean to you?

Sarah Williams: Well South Memphis it kinda means a lot to me because I lost my mother in South Memphis. That's one thing it means to me but truthfully speaking it means a lot to me because I worked in South Memphis for I guess about 30 or 40 years. I worked at this pickery where I was saying about over there on Bartley. I worked there 29 years.

Tretarius McCain: Would you say that they treated you fair at that pickery?

Sarah Williams: Huh?

Tretarius McCain: Would you say that they treated you fair at that pickery?

Sarah Williams: Did I enjoy the pickery?

Tretarius McCain: Did they treat you fair there?

Sarah Williams: *[Laughter]* I hate this because you see when you get old your hearing gets kinda bad. You can't hear real good so by me being 99 years old, you know, that has a lot to do with my hearing.

Cameron Jones: Are you comfortable with the reputation of South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Yeah I'm comfortable.

Cameron Jones: What makes you comfortable with it?

Sarah Williams: What makes me comfortable?

Cameron Jones: Yes, ma'am.

[00:12:00] –CUT 2 – Begin Segment 3

Sarah Williams: Well I always make myself comfortable with people because I love people and I'm a very talkative person and I love to be around people and I always talk to the young people because young people don't like to speak to old folks. They don't have no idea that they're gonna get old one day. When I was growing up you would dare not to pass a old person, whether you knew him or not, you had to speak and if you didn't and if that person told your parents you had a whipping so I always tell the old people, I say, "Do you wanna grow old or do you wanna die young," and they say, "I don't care, it don't make me no difference," you know, to be kinda haughty and some of 'em be real sweet. They'll listen to what I got to say and I tell them, I say, "Love your elders and be sweet to your elders and tell your parents to let you go to church." I told the children one day last week, I said, "If I had a bus, I would come by and take every last one of you to Sunday school." I said, "Y'all ever been to Sunday school?"

They say, "No, ma'am," and that just hurt me. They didn't go, their parents didn't go and they didn't send them, you know? You can get a church bus to pick if your children if you don't wanna go. You can do that so I think the first step in life is God in your life. If you don't have Christ in your life, it's empty.

It's empty. Your life is nothing without the love of God in you.

Cameron Jones: How would you describe South Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Sarah Williams: How did I enjoy South Memphis?

Cameron Jones: How would you describe South Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Sarah Williams: Well you wanna know why I came to South Memphis?

Cameron Jones: Like how would you describe it during the '60s and '70s?

Sarah Williams: How did I decide to come to South Memphis?

Cameron Jones: Yeah.

[13:57:00]

Sarah Williams: Well my mother lived in South Memphis and my husband passed away when I was living in **William Ford Home**, which I lived there 14 years and I was alone up there and she hated for me to be up there by myself and she encouraged me. She had a brand-new duplex built and she asked me would I come and stay with her. Well I didn't want to come because South Memphis it wasn't so built up and I was used to the bright lights [*laughter*] but I gave up to her and told her I would come and live in South Memphis and that's where I lived. I've been in South Memphis I guess about 50 years and that was on Temple, which is right off of Kansas Street.

Cameron Jones: What was going on in South Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Sarah Williams: Huh?

Cameron Jones: What was going on in Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Sarah Williams: What was going on in what now?

Cameron Jones: In the '60s and '70s?

Sarah Williams: Well in – let me see, one time did you say in '66?

Cameron Jones: '60s and '70s.

Sarah Williams: I was trying to think what was going on. I don't know. I can't think of it right now.

Cameron Jones: Do you have any memories about Martin Luther King or the Sanitation Strike that occurred here in Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Do I have anything about Martin Luther King?

Cameron Jones: Yeah.

Sarah Williams: Yeah I was living over here on Temple, in South Memphis, over Kansas, like I told you, when Martin Luther King got killed and when Martin Luther got killed the next day was a beautiful snow and it was so pretty but it didn't last but that one day and night so it was a whole lot of scurrying going on like burning.

[00:16:02]

Sarah Williams: They was burning but they only burned down their own community. They burnt down in black community and the people

said, “Why would you burn down your own community? Your black people didn’t kill Martin Luther King; white people killed Martin Luther King. Now why would you burn up your community?” Talking about they **was** gonna burn up his dream.

Well that was stupid to me. They wasn’t burning up Martin Luther King’s dream, they was burning up their own dream because they were burning up the grocery stores and different things like that. Well see that’s where the black people had to go to the grocery and then when you burn up your grocery where you going to eat and it was right in the neighborhood, see, which a lotta seniors then, which I wasn’t a real senior. I was old but I wasn’t a real senior, you could walk to the grocer’s, see what I’m saying, and if somebody burn up a grocery store in your neighborhood, that’s your dream. The white man might own it but you’re still burning up your dream.

You’ve got to go somewhere else or pay somebody to take you to the grocery store and back then a whole lotta people didn’t have cars.

Cameron Jones: Were the people in South Memphis different than they are now?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Cameron Jones: Were the people in South Memphis different than they are now?

Sarah Williams: Yeah because more people getting killed in South Memphis than there was then. Every time you wake up now and turn the television on somebody got killed and a lotta the neighborhood kinda like in certain neighborhoods it’s worse than others. These people that got killed right across the street over there, these people that get killed all around, and it’s just terrible. Yeah it’s frightening for seniors to go anywhere. Now there was a time in South Memphis when you could go to church at night.

[00:17:58] – CUT 3 – begin Segment 4

Sarah Williams: We would come here for Sunday school for 11:00 AM service and we’d leave and go home and then go to another church and come back here for **BTU** in the evening and stay ‘til service at night and then we’d go home.

Nobody bothered you but now you’re almost afraid to come out to the church because it’s dangerous, more dangerous now than it was years ago.

Cameron Jones: Would you say that the church is the best thing in South Memphis, like all the churches that they have?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Cameron Jones: Would you say that all the churches in South Memphis are the best things in South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: I didn't hear you.

Cameron Jones: Oh, would you say that all the churches in South Memphis are the best things in South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: You're paying in what?

Cameron Jones: Would you say that the churches in South Memphis are the best things in South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Would I say hatred?

Cameron Jones: That the churches, are they best thing that's in South Memphis.

Sarah Williams: **You're crazy.** I don't know what you said.

Cameron Jones: What do you think would make South Memphis a better place?

Sarah Williams: What do I think the next --?

Cameron Jones: What would make South Memphis a better place?

Sarah Williams: I think maybe and they're trying to do that. They're trying to get different axillaries for young people to go to and teach them because, see, I don't think they get a lot of teaching at home. Now parents want the teachers and the ministers to raise their children. They don't do too much teaching of their children. The little children **be** up in the morning, the early, **them** still in the bed.

If they had more places and if more young people would go to these different axillaries it would be better and let the people teach 'em. They got a lotta places now for young people to go but then they don't go, all of 'em don't go so it'd be better if their parents would encourage 'em to go to these different places and it would be better if their parents would do a little bit more for the children, like teaching 'em and, like, maybe leading 'em, taking 'em somewhere, take 'em to church and tell 'em about the Lord and it would be better. I think it would be much better.

[00:20:20]

Cameron Jones: What is the reputation of South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Cameron Jones: What is the reputation of South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: What is what in South Memphis?

Cameron Jones: What is the reputation of South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: What is the leading places in South Memphis? There ain't too many. They got a community center on Kansas and they got the Moose Lodge, which used to be the post office at Mallory and Kansas and the rest of 'em, mostly it's churches would be the leading places that I can think of right now.

Cameron Jones: Are you hopeful about the future of South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Cameron Jones: Are you hopeful about the future of South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Well I don't know about that.

Cameron Jones: Do you have any fond memories of your life in South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Do I have any what?

Cameron Jones: Do you have any fond memories of your life in South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Mmm, any memories?

Cameron Jones: Yeah.

Sarah Williams: Yep, I was trying to think of some memories that I have. One thing I remember they built some nice schools down here. They built **River Deuce** since I've been down here and they built **Collier** and they built Riverview Middle School.

[00:22:00]

Sarah Williams: I can remember that. A lot of – I tell you what else happened in South Memphis when I was working at the pickery, when they first integrated the buses, you used to get the bus at Mallory -- at the

end of Mallory -- and Kansas but later years after they saw that integration was gonna be in people – black people could still ride the buses, they changed that bus from a city bus to a school bus and you couldn't ride it, couldn't nobody ride but the white children.

They'd be going to school and if you went anywhere in this neighborhood you had to walk. I remember that because I was working and I had to walk because I didn't have **no** car.

Cameron Jones: How would you compare race relations in Memphis then and now?

Sarah Williams: Well I think it's gone 100 percent than what it was when I was a young woman but there were so many places you couldn't go. If you went to Central Station you had to go to the black water and drink. You couldn't drink in the white foundation and you couldn't go to the white restroom or nothing like that and it always was white or black so that's what made a whole lot of difference with people and if you got on the bus, you had to get in the extreme back, stand up and all. You couldn't come of the front. You had to go out the side door; they had side doors for you to go off.

Cameron Jones: Is there any advice that you would like to give young people in South Memphis?

Sarah Williams: Hmm?

Cameron Jones: Is there any advice that you would like to give young people?

[00:24:00] – Cut 4 – Begin Segment 5

Sarah Williams: Say would I like what?

Cameron Jones: Would you like to give any advice to the young people?

Sarah Williams: No, I done give all the advice that I know that I'd like to give except leadership. It's a lacking of leadership and that the people would listen, the young people. The young people now **is** not listening. You know a lot of people when you have these bad **stungs** and things, you know, you hear 'em say, "Mother Nature." They did that.

That's God's work, that's not Mother Nature. God made Mother Nature. He made everything on this earth. If you would know this

where it's not fire it's water and where it's not water it's a drought. That's a curse on the earth.

God made the earth beautiful, put everything here for man to enjoy and to be nice and he's destroying it and destroying each other and there's so much hatred with each other and the Lord don't like that. He want you to be as one here on earth and he's just really destroying a lot of it. Now I'm a staunch believer in God and I believe that the Bible will tell if you would tell if you would honor yourself and come to Him, He would change everything. You can have a problem and if you would pray and ask God, like if you're in school, you got something that you wanna learn and look like it's hard for you to learn, you ain't got nothing to do but ask God to open up your understanding and He'll do it but you've got to mean what you say. You don't say from lips, you have to mean it from your heart. You have to know what you're saying and what you're asking God because he gonna hold you to your promise.

[00:26:08]

Now you can say, "Well, I'm gonna do so-and-so, oh Lord, I'm gonna do so-and-so." That's on your lips but something's gonna happen to where you He put you in **worser** shape than what you're in. Now if you don't believe it, try it. Try what I'm saying. Try it because you *[laughter]* see if you haven't ever experienced these things you wouldn't know to tell somebody else so I just wish that the younger race – everybody's saying the young race is a lost generation.

Well it's not a lost generation if they would only believe and listen to leadership. That's what's the problem now. They don't listen. They won't let nobody tell 'em nothing because a long time reverend gonna be preaching, you have to stop and tell 'em up in the balcony be quiet. Their mind is not on what he's saying.

He's trying to teach 'em a way to live a long time and live and be prosperous in life. That you got to listen and believe in what older people say. Most young people think older people can't tell 'em nothing and then they say, "I don't wanna get old" but you say that until you get ready to die and then when *[laughter]* – and that's a different story but it would be nice if all the young people had somebody to talk to 'em at once and just talk to 'em like I catch 'em. When I catch 'em passing my house I stop 'em sometimes, "Y'all wait a minute, wait, wait," I say, "Later I'm gonna talk to you," and they're standing there. I say, "Don't you pass here another day and see me in this yard and don't say hi to grandma."

Now all the little children pass and teenagers, too, and they say,
“Hey, grandma.”

[00:28:00]

Sarah Williams: You just got – it’s a certain attitude that you have to have when you talk to young people. You can’t just jump up there and holler at ‘em like they ain’t got no sense. They got plenty of sense, they just don’t want to hear what you got say because you’re not telling ‘em in the right attitude and I think if the young people would just straighten them little selves up, it would be a better world, it would be a better South Memphis, it would be a better north and it would just be a better world. That’s what I think.

Cameron Jones: Thank you, Miss Williams, for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

Sarah Williams: Huh?

Cameron Jones: I wanted to for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

Sarah Williams: How could I do what?

Cameron Jones: We wanted to thank you for participating.

[End of Audio]