

[00:00:00]

*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.

*Malishia Smith:* And I'm Malishia Smith.

*Tretarius McCain:* And we are honored to meet you and learn from 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?

*Willie Bates:* Willie Earl Bates, known by my grandchildren as Papo, and I immediately accept that – pass to you the spirit of being my grandchildren.

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

*Willie Bates:* How about that, February 19, 1940.

*Tretarius McCain:* Where were you born –

[00:01:00]

and raised?

*Willie Bates:* Well, I'm glad you asked. I mentioned that to Delta State a couple of weeks ago, and I don't mention it, and most people don't ask and don't focus on it. I was born in Shaw, Mississippi, and I left when I was three months. I always tease and say we stealed away from Mississippi, but I found great hospitality and great connection there. The word has spreaded to my native place of birth, and good things have happened, and the beat goes on.

*Tretarius McCain:* What is your occupation?

*Willie Bates:* Well, I'm retired, actually, and I continue to mention that even though I operate The Four Way with great pride and –

[00:02:00]

honor, let's go back to some of my career days. I worked with Universal Life Insurance Company, the greatest and largest employer in this community of African American, I started my sophomore year, while enrolled at Tennessee State, and of course I

actually caught the bus right on Mississippi and Walker to go to my debit area, so I worked there for 38 years until retirement. I am also involved in real estate, and by the way, that's how I got involved with The Four Way, as a real estate investor.

*Tretarius McCain:* Are you or were you ever married?

*Willie Bates:* I am married, and I'm glad you asked that. If you've been doing research –

[00:03:00]

you ask such good questions, young man, at a young age. I'm celebrating 50 years of marriage this month. You must've been that fly on the wall, you've been looking man, you – we celebrated on last Sunday at Metropolitan Baptist Church. I've been there since the time in which we moved in Lemoyne Garden, 1947. My wife is Joy Ellen Bates, Joy Ellen Jones-Bates from Brownsville, Tennessee. We have two lovely and outstanding offspring, Roman Earl Bates and Patrice Simone Bates-Thompson, and two grandkids who refer me – to me as Papo. **Jerry Rishaun Thompson** –

[00:04:00]

who I'm honored, again this month, that he will be moving to Rhode Island and getting ready to go and – as a part of the Navy Academy. So a lot – and it's happening this month, a lot of great things are happening this month, how about that, and you're here. Go ahead.

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

*Willie Bates:* I'm so glad you asked. The neighborhood that I grew up in was the reason that the machine is out front right now. It was a neighborhood filled with versatility, individuals from all walks of life, we had doctors and businessmen and teachers and we had extended family members –

[00:05:00]

who would make sure that you did the right thing in the neighborhood. We had lots of excitement, and matter of fact, I actually start working at the next block with my role model, Mr. B.G. Olive. Mr. Olive was one of the executives at Universal

Life Insurance Company. I shall never forget that my sister was dealing with seeds at that time, flower seeds to be exact. She went to Mrs. Olive's house and asked if she would buy some flower seeds so she could win a camera. I guess she was thinking like you youngsters out today, you're recording me and you're taking pictures, and Mrs. Olive asked her if she had a brother who could cut grass. And she said, "Yes, I have a brother who can cut grass." I was nine at the time. She said, "Have him come up," the next day I went and she looked down –

[00:06:00]

the steps as I rung the doorbell, she put an eyeball on me, she said, "You're too small to cut grass. You can't cut any grass can you?" I said, "Yes, I can. Yes, I can," and I started cutting grass when I was nine, and I worked there from 1949 to 1955. By that time, I had started developing muscles. I had a push lawnmower and I cut the hill and I cut the hedges with hand clippers, and I decided I needed to go play me some football because with these muscles I knew that I needed to work. I was the son of a singer parent mother. I had three pretty sisters. I actually had so many friends I didn't know what to do. I felt like the lady in the shoe, I had so many friends who wanted to be my friend because of those pretty sisters.

[00:07:00]

But they actually help me at The Four Way right now, in terms of working. I have a niece who's helping me, who's the offspring of those sisters. So you always want to be kind to your siblings, and never forget them as you make life's journey.

*Tretarius McCain:* What was your home life like?

*Willie Bates:* What was my own –

*Tretarius McCain:* Home.

*Willie Bates:* Home life. Thank you. I have, and had, a beautiful life experience, with a mother who was very loving and she sacrificed for her children, and she made some awesome decisions to make sure that we were fed each day, and I'm reminded so much of your program, The Garden, where you plant vegetables –

[00:08:00]

and you encourage people to eat right and do the right thing. I should never, and can never remember a day when I came home and my mother would not have a soul mean. Vegetables, greens and corn, yams and mashed potatoes. We really didn't have meat, except on special occasions, but I think at this day I can look back and say because of her care for her children, and nourishment and providing us with the right food, that we enjoyed a healthier life at this time. Had a older sister, and talking about siblings and the importance of role models with your family, who started us along the way. That same –

[00:09:00]

sister who work with me today in this business, she's a cashier. She went to Tennessee State and she did very well. I went the next year and it's important that you remember that you can make a difference in your entire family. My mother made a difference, many people in the community, I remember Metropolitan Baptist Church. The day we moved in the neighborhood, that particular week, my mother carried us to Metropolitan. A Rev. S.A. Owens was the minister at that time. Rev. S.A. Owens was the founder of Owen College. He was a great inspiration to me and many other persons. You will see his picture downstairs under a historical lamp, because he was so –

[00:10:00]

important. He was indeed a shining light. He was a shining star for all to see. Rev. S.A. Owens was a co-founder, what is now Lemoyne-Owen College, where the great tradition in terms of encouragement for those youth and those individuals coming on is continued. It was continued during the Rev. Fred C. Lofton, Dr. Lofton, and now Dr. Reginald Porter. We have a very strong relationship with that institution because the seed was planted a long time ago through many individuals, the Rev. S.A. Owens set the stage. And what you do at this time in your life will follow you for the rest of your life.

*Tretarius McCain:* What was school like for you?

*Willie Bates:* School was so exciting, so exciting. I attended –

[00:11:00]

Porter. We actually – again, as I said, moved in this area in '47, went to Porter Junior High. Keep in mind that this is where many

of the starts for Stax started. There was a gentleman by the name of Mr. Martin, who was over the band, and David Porter and the musicians, Maurice White and Percy Wiggins and they were all a part of that group. The – I would say that they started off from, I think, grade school and continued to The Knife, it was a junior high. And of course, I was one of those individuals who moved on to Booker Washington after the eighth grade because we played –

[00:12:00]

sport. I was also – and I believe in making promises and keeping promises. I was a Cub Scout, Boy Scout and Explorer Scout, and I think I was a Cub Scout right down the street under Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins. That was also associated Metropolitan Church.

*Tretarius McCain:* You say that you were a Boy Scout. Did you ever make it to Eagle Scout?

*Willie Bates:* No, I actually moved on to some other things that I thought were exciting, but we went to Philmont, New Mexico, on Kit Carson Trail. So I guess I would probably be a recipient for a honorary Eagle Scout award. To this very day, being prepared is a very important trait, even in the operation of this business.

[00:13:00]

So I am very grateful for that experience, as it prepared me in my mind and operation to be on my toes and to do my best to honor God and my country, to keep myself physically strong, mentally alert, and mortally straight.

*Tretarius McCain:* How did segregation impact your educational experiences?

*Willie Bates:* Well, I supposed that coming along, until the movement caught fire, didn't give much attention to that as I should have been, because you had teachers in this area who were so loving and supportive in our education. There's Mrs. **Shelltoe**, who lived on the corner of Orleans and Walker.

[00:14:00]

Mrs. Dory Todd, who lived on Walker Avenue and Driver. There was Booker T. Jones family lived on Edith, Mrs. Pippin lived on Edith. Teachers were in this neighborhood, we got the best in terms of support and encouragement. It was not until I went to Tennessee State that things came full force. Matter of fact, I was

downtown at Kress's when we started the movement and spread it throughout this country. I went down very leery, I sat on the stool at that store, and I was hopeful that I would not be aggravated because my upbringing would not – I didn't know what my reaction would be, but we always tried to do the best we can.

[00:15:00]

Matter of fact, Dr. King was a frequent visitor to here at The Four Way, so my concern and best wishes for school, et cetera, was that we would one day get the support of the total community.

*Tretarius McCain:* What church or churches have you attended?

*Willie Bates:* As I said earlier, Metropolitan Baptist Church is the church. Matter of fact, I'm doing the fourth generation now, my mother, myself, my children, and now my grandchildren and my grandson, so we're excited and we're well pleased. We put our bucket down in this community, and I guess that was – I actually heard about The Four Way being up for auction by Union Planters Bank from Dr. Reginald Porter. So Metropolitan –

[00:16:00]

Baptist Church has meant so much. So that was the church that I attended, and the church who had opportunity to move from this community to another, but chose to be here because they recognize the importance and the opportunities in terms of serving persons right here in this area, could for many.

*Tretarius McCain:* Can you tell us about the history of The Four Way Grill?

*Willie Bates:* I'm glad you asked. The history of The Four Way Grill is simply marvelous, exciting, stimulating. It tells a story of a service of this great community as a whole. The Four Way was actually in existence before 1946, owned by a gentleman by the name of John Denton. Beneath us was previously –

[00:17:00]

a pool hall, but that was also the site of the original The Four Way. You've heard of *Driving Miss Daisy*? Well, the gentleman who incorporated The Four Way was also a chauffeur. His name was Mr. Clint Cleaves. Mr. Cleaves was the chauffeur for Boss Crock. His wife, Mrs. Ilene Cleaves, was the cook, was the manager, was the director of The Four Way. She was a person who won the Black Heritage Award, as you noticed on the pictures downstairs,

that put The Four Way on the map, worldwide. And we're delighted to continue this tradition. The size of The Four Way –

[00:18:00]

was not indicative of the masses that they served. They had a dining room in the back where you'd ring the doorbell and come in, and the section that you came in much smaller served hundreds of people each day. It's much larger now, it includes the first section coming south, which was a barber shop, Mr. Yarborough's barber shop, and the section that I mentioned to you that was the pool hall. So it's much larger. We call the area that we're in now the upper room. We closed the back section where you would ring the doorbell, and we knew that we needed a special place for special event, and that's where we have it. This is where we have it, in the upper room. I thought it was appropriate because we want to move forward with the spirit and the blessing that have been ours to –

[00:19:00]

enjoy.

*Tretarius McCain:* How has The Four Way Grill served in the south Memphis community?

*Willie Bates:* It is really a centerpiece. The Four Way Grill has been a joy, The Four Way Grill has been a setting place for conversation, for dialogue, in the meets – midst of disturbances, in the midst of frustration when individuals needed to come to conclusion. I guess you would conclude that discussing issues over a good meal is just a smart thing to do. Discussing issues over a good meal make the going easy, and end in good results and good vibration and emotion. Matter of fact –

[00:20:00]

when the discussion was launched in terms of consolidated school, unified school, both superintendents met here, upstairs in the upper room. So when I think about politics and community involvement, you have to remember that that started a long time ago, even under Boss Crock. It has always been a place for all of the people. Individuals were welcome here, and Mrs. Cleaves and Mr. Cleaves set the stage and we continue to enjoy that same type of spirit. People from all over the world come to The Four Way. The Four Way is also a setting where we try to encourage healthy

eating. I brought some yams up, we do fresh greens and cabbage and all of the vegetables that –

[00:21:00]

help to maintain and heal your body. That's a part of the agenda, is to encourage people to eat and take the time to enjoy good home cooking, and we're glad to partner with you in terms of Knowledge Quest and what you young people are all about. And we're so proud of you, and we're honored to be a part of your extended family.

What a great neighborhood, south Memphis. That's all I really know. I've been in south Memphis within three blocks of where we are, since 1947, south Memphis. Some people are trained in other areas, in Vietnam and whatever, but I grew up in south Memphis.

[00:22:00]

I learned my lesson in Lemoyne Garden in south Memphis. I was nourished in terms of encouragement in south Memphis. South Memphis is a very special area. The gentleman who built the home that I now live in, Mr. **Irving Cooper**, was from south Memphis. He had a business on the corner of Fourth and Walker, south Memphis. On Edith Street, Jennette Street, teachers were housed in this area, in south Memphis. Dr. Kelso Walker lived in south Memphis. You see many **mounds** and markers where history of Memphis –

[00:23:00]

took place in south Memphis. South Memphis has always been a special part of Memphis, Tennessee. Lemoyne College, a place where outstanding citizens, from the mayor to other individuals, from teachers to educators throughout the world went to school at Lemoyne-Owen College, south Memphis. When I grew up, there was a daycare facility, playground area, kindergarten area, Bethlehem Center, Bethlehem Center, in south Memphis. South Memphis, Stax, world known is located in south Memphis.

[00:24:00]

Elmwood Cemetery, a great place for resting of outstanding individuals of all races are resting in south Memphis, a historical location. What more can I say, except that it is a treasury that



individuals need to know about, they need to visit the great pearls, great insight, great history in south Memphis. Matter of fact, it was very clear to me that this community was a jewel of a place, was a jewel of an opportunity –

[00:25:00]

for our future. It would be and will continue to grow and prosper, without a doubt. I'm certain that south Memphis will be a landmark for years to come throughout the country and throughout this nation. And I am simply honored to be among the first to set up a flag in the re-development of south Memphis that is now a part of Soulsville, USA. What a great opportunity for you young people to be a part of this transition, and to continue to build on this historical event. South Memphis, the Civil Rights Museum.

[00:26:00]

South Memphis, where Dr. King visited Four Way Restaurant before the night of that great mountaintop speech. This was one of his frequent eating place, as noted by the news media downstairs, the news article. The Four Way was a place where individuals were welcome, they were well fed, they enjoyed the food, they were comfortable, and they were safe. They felt safe. And individuals now know that to be the case. This is one of the safest communities for visitors anywhere, and I am a witness. I come down and take care of my business, and I've never had anything but support from individuals. Matter of fact, it is my honor and pleasure –

[00:27:00]

to take the time to say thanks to the people of this community, for the pride and the dignity and their support and their character and their determination to do the best that they can. It happened that again, in July, this month, you'll be celebrating the first annual Lemoyne Garden reunion. So you all are witnessing the beginning of history and the best yet to come.

*Malishia Smith:*

Are you comfortable with the reputation of south Memphis?

*Willie Bates:*

Am I comfortable? I'm like a rabbit in a briar patch. I am absolutely excited. As I told you initially, in 1955 –

[00:28:00]

at 4:00 I would pick up my paper south of McLemore, with that little red wagon that's in the patio area. I would walk past The Four Way about 4:30. Fear not, I feel very confident, there's no reason to do otherwise. If you're walking that time of night, I am absolutely comfortable. You have some great people in this community and it's probably one of the best kept secrets.

*Malishia Smith:* What was going on inside Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

*Willie Bates:* Joy, joy, great joy. People doing what we encourage individuals to do at The Four Way.

[00:29:00]

Expressing love. I was asked the question, with do you cook with, Mister, in The Four Way? I said, "Love." In this community, in the '60s and '50, individuals simply expressed brotherly love and sisterly love. Those individuals who pull up education and employment are yet in touch with one another. Their children are in touch with one another. So the record speaks for itself. People who stay together obviously have love and respect for one another. You can't maintain extended kinship. Individuals who –

[00:30:00]

came to The Four Way in the '40s and '50s still come here today and talk and share information about their grandparents bringing them here, their grandparents bringing them to The Four Way, their mother, their uncle. That tells a story. The proof of the pudding is in the expression, in the eating, the way that you live, and demonstrate. That tells you that it's something special. For whatever reason would The Four Way still exist, except the memory and the love flow from heart to heart in terms of individuals who were – who grew up in the area. There's nothing else here. There's barren land, with a few businesses –

[00:31:00]

and a few entrepreneurs who see the vision, who have already put markers down, except that individuals remember that history says how great it was, how sweet it was, how happy, how comfortable, how exciting, and they return because there's real love within the heart of boys and girls, men and women, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, who know about soul food, who know about real love. Real love.

*Malishia Smith:* What is the best thing about south Memphis?

*Willie Bates:* The best thing about south Memphis is its people and its legacy, its history –

[00:32:00]

that was taken for granted, that was not appreciated, that was forgotten. The best thing about south Memphis is that we have another chance. It's a great opportunity to have a second chance, to be able to look back and realize what a joy, what a blessing it was, and for us to abandon this great opportunity, looking for what we thought was a more fertile soil. Businesses were all along the corner here. There was a Ace theater across the street. There was a five-and-dime store across the street. Matter of fact, I bought my mother some china out of the money that I made on the –

[00:33:00]

first – on my first paycheck when I was cutting grass. A grocery store, that was across the street. Let me see, oh boy, your drug store was on this corner. They later moved to the north of The Four Way. Oh boy, had they gotten there \_\_\_\_\_ I'm thinking about the Harlem House, a senior moment. But you're cutting out a lot of stuff. The Harlem House was across the street. Cleaners were in the neighborhood. Matter of fact, shoemaker. Let us not forget those individuals who helped us along the way. You will notice a shoe –

[00:34:00]

stitching machine that – what was a shoe stitching machine that we placed in the front of The Four Way. It was actually a part of the shoemaker's equipment. I shall never forget on a Saturday morning, rain, rain, rain. My mother left home with a bag full of shoes, with holes everywhere, to take them to get them fixed. Shoemaker, Mr. **Lafayette Raeford**, fixed the shoes on credit, and my mother paid her indebtedness. All of the people who I talked about who helped us out can be remembered and appreciated and acknowledged. When we got ready to the demolition and to tear the building down, that shoe stitching machine was still in the abandoned shop –

[00:35:00]

a needle showing that would scare a child to death if they were in a doctor's office, a big needle. But it simply reminded me of how well the community was stitched together in love, and how people helped on another to accomplish their mission, how we were encouraged along the way to come from where we were then to where we are now, with you and for where you will go in years to come. The sky is the limit for young people like you. We're proud to be your Papo. We're proud to have you interview us and we're proud of this other.

*Malishia Smith:* What do you think would make south Memphis a better place?

[00:36:00]

*Willie Bates:* Say again?

*Malishia Smith:* What do you think would make south Memphis a better place?

*Willie Bates:* If people like y'all young people will listen, that you will use your energy and inspiration, your teaching and guidance, to take us to higher heights, to not allow the sacrifice of people helping you and encouraging you to do better and to become the best that you can be. That's how south Memphis become – can become better. That's how this city can become better. That's how the world can become better. We're counting on y'all.

*Malishia Smith:* Thank you for participating.

*Willie Bates:* Let's the story out, that's what we're doing.

*Malishia Smith:* Yes. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered?

*Willie Bates:* Let me thank you again for your participation and your discipline and your intelligence. Keep on keeping on. If I would leave one –

[00:38:00]

final thought, it would be to always acknowledge our Heavenly Father. Be prayerful and remember to give him the praise, and follow his guidance, and ask for his generous blessing and guidance. You will fall, but get up and call on our Heavenly Father, for all good things come from him. One of my final prayers before the opening of The Four Way was a prayer for the support of the churches in this community, and I'm so glad that that prayer –

[00:39:00]

has been answered. Every Tuesday, or during the week, persons who are in the spirit of soul searching and soul food and soul people visit The Four Way. My advisor, Mr. – Dr. Payne and Dr. Lofton and Rev. Ray and all of the ministers, backers, I hate to call names. I want y'all to cut that out. Can you cut it out? Will you take that out? Please do that for me, I called names. The support of the churches has been marvelous. The support of people in the community. I'd like to thank my family, who has been patient with me and –

[00:40:00]

my entire family, my church family and this community, the colleges, University of Memphis and their special staff and Ken and Rhodes College and LeMoyne College and Knowledge Quest and UT. Their students have been here, and it's obvious that this is results of a higher calling, that it's a movement that is beyond all of us. Persons from all over the world have visited The Four Way. We have been endorsed by the *New York Times*, we are listed in the travel advisory. It's been exciting, the endorsement that we have received have come from satisfied customers, and I'd like to thank all – and encourage all businesses –

[00:41:00]

who have helped to encourage the prosperity of this city. We've gotten support and encouragement from the city and all faces, and we appreciate that. The Civil Rights Museum, persons who travel, Stax. Every day, somebody who want to know about soul music also want to know about soulful people and soulful food, soul food. So all in all, we just all a part of the big picture of Memphis. We are proud to be a part of a small part of this great city and our contribution, that we thank you and we look forward to bigger and better things as we go forward.

*Malishia Smith:*

Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom project.

[00:42:00]