

Damesha Boone: On behalf of Cross Roads to Freedom, Rose College and Knowledge Quiz I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Damesha Boone.

Rodtavis Miller: And I'm Rodtavis Miller.

Damesha Boone: And I'm honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at Cross Roads to Freedom website. Today's date is June 25th, 2014.

Can you state some basic background information for the record?
What is your name?

Elvin Russell: Elvin Russell.

Damesha Boone: If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Elvin Russell: 1944.

Damesha Boone: Where were you born and raised?

Elvin Russell: — —.

Damesha Boone: Did you like the experience being raised in the foothills?

Elvin Russell: At that time I thought it was fine. I thought everything was fine, because I didn't know anything but that. But as I grew older, I found out there was differences.

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Damesha Boone: What is your occupation or what was your occupation?

Elvin Russell: I worked as a substitute teacher and at First Tennessee Bank.

Damesha Boone: Did you like being a substitute teacher?

Elvin Russell: Yes, because I was helping the children. I love children.

Damesha Boone: Working at the First Tennessee Bank was it a fun job or was it just a get by job?

Elvin Russell: It was a teacher's job. I worked with documents, put in the hole and release the lien on people's property for their loans.

Damesha Boone: Did you marry?

Elvin Russell: No.

Damesha Boone: Did you have any children?

Elvin Russell: No.

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

Elvin Russell: Yes. I grew up on **Band in the foot home**.

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I was born in the apartment that my parents lived in. And the neighborhood was fine. We felt pretty safe for a while. And in fact grew older than we did not feel safe.

Damesha Boone: Can you tell me why did you all start to not feel safe in the foot home?

Elvin Russell: Because when I was like three to about seven or eight years old we could put like a blanket on the ground and at night and lay down and before we went in the house to go to bed all of the children in the neighborhood would meet in the middle. That was an apartment on the -- facing each other. And all the children that's what we did. We played hopscotch, hide and go seek.

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Parents were sitting on the porches talking.

Damesha Boone: What were your parents -- I mean who were your parents and what were they like?

Elvin Russell: My parents is James Russell and Dorothy Mayfield Russell. They were childhood sweethearts. And they had been married 40 years before my mother passed.

Damesha Boone: What schools did you attend?

Elvin Russell: Lee School. Lee School was my elementary school, which is now burned down, torn down. And I attended Booker T. Washington. I was the last 9th grade class under Professor Blare T. Hunt.

Damesha Boone: Did you enjoy your experiences in school?

Elvin Russell: Yes.

Damesha Boone: What churches did you attend and what were they like?

Elvin Russell: I attended the Temple Church of God twice and it burned when I was in the 5th grade. It burned down and then I started attending my grandfather's church.

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And it was a nice church. We just did things together. I've always enjoyed being in other people and other children.

Damesha Boone: Can you share some of the memories from your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

Elvin Russell: Yes, we -- I experienced a lot of things working together, doing things together, adventures and I was a Girl Scout. I did Life Teen. I did a lot of volunteer work.

Damesha Boone: Did you enjoy Girl Scouts?

Elvin Russell: Yes, I enjoyed it, because we took trips. We got plans to take trips. And that was fun. I was the only girl with five brothers. So I wanted to be out away from them.

[0:05:00]

Rodtavis Miller: Okay, let's talk about your life in south Memphis. What exactly does south Memphis mean to you?

Elvin Russell: My heritage. That's where I grew up. My parents grew up on Edith and they were childhood sweethearts. And so they taught us that togetherness as a family.

Damesha Boone: Exactly what was going on in south Memphis in the '60's and '70's? What was **Bill** Street like compared to what it is now?

Elvin Russell: Bill Street was a place where most of us would go to the new dance and movies, __ __, places like that to shop. And Nat __ who also worked as a teacher and watch duty he was also a radio disc jockey and he and John __ __ people like them they would really see -- take care of the young people and give us a good time.

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Rodtavis Miller: Since you had a person like that actually working in __ back then?

Elvin Russell: Yes.

Rodtavis Miller: And what was that like?

Elvin Russell: It was really nice. We just knew to be on our P's and Q's when Nat and __ __ saw us. We knew to do right and always be polite.

Rodtavis Miller: That attitude __ __?

Elvin Russell: I graduated from there. My mother and her sisters and brothers were graduated from there. My father and his six sisters and brothers graduated from there. My mother had six children but only five graduated from there, because that's when integration started.

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So my youngest brother did not get to graduate from Washington.

Rodtavis Miller: What was that like for him?

Elvin Russell: It was very disappointing. And I could see some good in it. I could see some bad in it, because my brother -- my youngest brother had to pass Hamilton School to go to White Haven where the Hamilton School kids were passing our house to go there. So to me they didn't -- they did not really do us fair. They put us where they wanted us to be. And my brother ended up graduated from **Overton** instead of ____.

Rodtavis Miller: But other than that it sounds like you come from a long line of BTW graduates?

Elvin Russell: Right.

Rodtavis Miller: How does that make you feel?

Elvin Russell: Proud, very proud of my family, my heritage. We were taught to do right and to act right, to be right.

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And so we did what we could to do what we could.

Rodtavis Miller: How is south Memphis different from now than it was?

Elvin Russell: Back then we could walk to any place we wanted to. I'd walk to **Lamar** College, because at that time we didn't have money to ride the bus. We didn't have a car. But I realized today that would be dangerous for me to do something like that. The neighborhoods have changed. The people have changed in the neighborhood. But homes are still there, but still I'm nice to people. I'm challenged to walk places. We walk downtown to ____ ville. Black and white which was ____ and we had to look at the sign. The sign said colored only ____ ____.

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And the whites they had another one. And ours was rusted and

dirty. And same things with all the other stores. We went to the counter to eat we had to stand up. So that's what made me start realizing the great difference in what I thought was really ____.

Rodtavis Miller: So are you saying that you were around during the segregation so exactly compared to now like I said, so do you think it's like ____ still going on?

Elvin Russell: Yeah, it's still going on.

Damesha Boone: How does that make you feel?

Elvin Russell: Well, I have my good days and my bad days about the way things go now. I don't -- some of the things I realize still not right. We are still into the segregation.

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And the other people are better than we are.

Rodtavis Miller: What is the reputation of south Memphis? Like what was it back then ____ ____ ____?

Elvin Russell: We were -- well Booker T. Washington has always been really ____ _____. But some great people have come out of the _____. **Joely** Brown, Thurmond Glover. A lot of the people that are working in the courthouses now came from Booker T. Washington, David Porter, Booker T. Washington.

Rodtavis Miller: How has it changed ____ ____?

Elvin Russell: How has it changed? The ____ home changed -- it's not as well as it was, because the people change.

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But there are some good and some bad in it in both the neighborhood I grew up in and Bill Street. But I think the white people seem to want to flock to Bill Street. But that was the only place we had to go. So we enjoyed it. Now they are enjoying some of the things that we've been doing all the time.

Rodtavis Miller: What happened to make you feel like -- made you feel like ____ ____ missing out all this time?

Elvin Russell: No, I think we were missing out, because the places that they have downtown like Union. That's what they -- we couldn't go to that place, but they can come to ours which is not fair. They can come to us, then we should be able to go to them.

Rodtavis Miller: So is it completely segregated ___?

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Elvin Russell: Right during my time.

Rodtavis Miller: Well, okay then what are some places in south Memphis that made it as the place to be?

Elvin Russell: That made it? **Wood Home**, the Memphis **Carriages**, like Bill Street. The movies all -- see like the movies we had to go upstairs in the back, go in the back, but now we can go in there. And we don't have to go upstairs. We don't have to go to the dark to the back. So to me it is maybe better, because I appreciate going in the white door especially when ___ ___ ___ to get in.

Rodtavis Miller: What is the best thing about south Memphis ___ ___?

[0:13:00]

Elvin Russell: Booker T. Washington High School, Blare T. Hunt. It was the best thing that happened to me. He would tell us, "Run you losers. Run from it. ___ ___, Run you fools. Run from the education." So he made us want to get an education.

Rodtavis Miller: Okay, my question on that. By me being a BTW Warrior myself, how do you think that school has changed? Do you think it has changed in anyway?

Elvin Russell: I don't visit there too often, so I don't know what -- I think they are doing better than the one time they looked like they were going down the wrong road. But now that President Obama is being here and it's very nice. It's very encouraging to the young people. I think it's doing much better. Professor Hunt would be proud of us.

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Rodtavis Miller: What do you think makes south Memphis a better place?

Elvin Russell: If we all get along. Think of each other. Think of how you would want to be treated. How you would want to be used and the compliments and the things that the white folks always want us to do. They should think about us as themselves. All of us should think of each other the way you want to be treated.

Rodtavis Miller: With new innovations and ___ ___ ___ are you hopeful for the future of south Memphis?

Elvin Russell: Yes, I am, because I still know a lot of people that are in south Memphis that seem like it is not being developed as it should, but I

realized that we may not get exactly what -- but I think they should do it better.

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Rodtavis Miller: Other than segregation do you have any fond memories of life in south Memphis that you now like to share?

Elvin Russell: Well, I enjoyed -- like I said, I enjoy walking to places with my friends. I enjoyed going to places in south Memphis. I enjoyed sleeping on the pallet in front of the building that I live on with my friends.

Rodtavis Miller: Sorry. Well, the next question is would you -- okay, seeing that you lived in south Memphis for a very long time would you have it any other way? Would you live somewhere else other than south Memphis?

Elvin Russell: No. No, I think it was the best thing. The best teacher of me, training for me. I appreciate what my parents instilled in me.

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Treat people like you want to be treated. Not the way they treat you. And I'm really thankful for that from the way my parents raised me and to go to church as being my church respect my friends, respect people, elderly people, young people too.

Rodtavis Miller: Well, speak of young people is there any advice that you would like to give them?

Elvin Russell: Yes. I would say for them to not get so hostile ready to fight. Think about it. And sometimes you can walk away. You won't have as much confusion and fighting and killing. You don't need to do that. It's not ____.

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Whatever you do it's not important that you get so upset about it that you have to turn to violence.

Rodtavis Miller: Is there any other interesting stories you would like to share like any other ____?

Elvin Russell: No, but Martin Luther King I remember living in ____ Home and my parents did not allow me to get into the march, but it was a great thing. My parents would try and protect me, keep me alive. But I also remember during the time that we got killed when people our black people went to ____ Smith and they just tore up the buildings. Tore the people's things.

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And I remember looking out my window, seeing all the guys tear clothes, bolts of clothing, that could be used and also we had the yards to stay all up and down **Band Street Hernando** ___ ___ all up and down it. And that was scary for me. Real scary. That's when I really, realized how much danger I lived in and didn't realize it. But we made it out.

Rodtavis Miller: Well thank you for participating in Cross Roads Freedom Project.

Elvin Russell: ___ ___.

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