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Looney: Hello. My name is Brittany **Looney** and –

Williams: My name is **Prince** ___.

Looney: And on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom and the Center for Transforming Communities, we'd like to thank you for sharing your story with us today.

Nikisha Greer: You're welcome.

Looney: Could you please state your name?

Nikisha Greer: My name is Nikisha Greer.

Looney: Okay and what year were your born? Your birthday?

Nikisha Greer: I'm born January 23, 1984.

Looney: And where were your born and raised?

Nikisha Greer: I was born in Memphis, raised down a street basically on National and it used to be National Apartments. Now it's a new complex they built.

Looney: And what school did you go to?

Nikisha Greer: I attended Treadwell Elementary and Treadwell High School then. It was Treadwell Junior High then high school.

Looney: You were in middle school there, too?

Nikisha Greer: Yes.

Looney: Could you tell us a little bit about life growing up around in the Highland Heights community?

Nikisha Greer: Basically, it was a rough environment. You had gangs, violence, et cetera going on. Same is similar now, but –

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the difference between when I went to school, we had an organization that came in to try to save us. So it was called City Builders and More. So, they reached out to all the troubled youth

to try to get them to steer towards Christ. So, with their help, I was able to get off that bad road and go down a straight path.

Looney: Could you tell us about this, well, I guess “bad road”?

Nikisha Greer: The bad road was basically, I was defiant. Didn't trust anybody because in my home life, I was let down so much in life so I didn't trust anybody, didn't care. I was smart, but I just wanted to be the bad kid. I wanted to fit in with everybody else. So, when I got – that was elementary.

When I got junior high – then it wasn't middle school – when I got to junior high, I was introduced to basketball. So, basketball gradually saved me and then once City Builders came into the neighborhood roughly around 1997, they teamed up with my basketball coach and that was the path that tried to keep me straight.

Looney: And you played for Treadwell?

Nikisha Greer: I played for Treadwell from 1997 all the way to 2002.

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Looney: And could you tell us a little bit about the team and the –

Nikisha Greer: The team, basically, it was a struggle in the beginning because you had – it was seventh through ninth grade. So I was a seventh grader with these big old ninth graders who were very experienced and I was inexperienced. But I had the drive and the heart so I continued to work hard and my talents got recognized when I got to the ninth grade. I was the only ninth grade on varsity and I started. So, I looked at that as my drive to keep on ‘cause everybody was pushing me and wanting to do better.

So, I got recognized for my basketball talents my 10th grade year and it just – it went on from there. So, my 12th grade year, I was granted with a scholarship to Bethel College so I was one of the first to get out of this neighborhood and go to college as a female and I'm the first in my family to graduate college.

Williams: What is your occupation?

Nikisha Greer: I am currently a special ed teacher. I taught at Treadwell from – came back to give back to my community in 2007 with the help of [Leas Merable](#) and Doctor Malone.

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They gave me an opportunity to come back to teach at Treadwell. So from 2007 to 2013, this past May, I was at Treadwell Middle School. And now, I'll be taking my talents to Douglass K8.

Looney: Could you tell us about your experience doing special ed at Treadwell?

Nikisha Greer: Basically, at Treadwell, when I went to school there, I didn't know special ed existed. All I knew was the severe moderate case of special ed. Never knew it existed.

Looney: But it did exist?

Nikisha Greer: It did exist, but they were always placed on the top floor – third floor. So, my class was downstairs – I was an honor student so I didn't never go upstairs to the third floor. My love for special ed came because when I got from college, I worked at Youth Villages and I seen that special ed kids were always looked over. They had issues, but everybody wanted to push it under the rug. So I was granted with an extra year of eligibility to play college so Bethel paid for my masters in special ed.

So, when I got to Treadwell, the same statistics were happening. These kids –

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were overlooked and just because they were learning disability, they were always pushing them or their behavior. So, my goal was to go in and try to change these kids and every year I was there, I impacted some kids. So, I stopped the trend of sending them to the office or putting them out and letting them know that, “You can learn also.”

Looney: What is the challenge with working with these special ed students?

Nikisha Greer: I guess the biggest challenge is you have – my caseload was the biggest at Treadwell. You have 30 kids with – everybody's different with different personalities. So, I might have a kid who is emotionally disturbed with a kid who has a reading disability or a mathematical disability. So, you have all these different personalities which you have to put in a pot to try to melt to try to

teach. So, it's crazy because I'm trying to deal with behavior and not trying to let –

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those kids who come to learn, try to put them on the back burner. So, the biggest challenge is trying to mold everybody personality to me. And throughout that process, it was like I was fine at diagnosing myself with like, “Oh, I got ADD” so you learn different things and different strategies to try to assist them.

Williams: Do you feel that these special ed students should be taught with the average students?

Nikisha Greer: Yes. At first – I guess, it is to me. At first, I didn't. I felt that they should have been in their own classroom because within a broad spectrum, when I was an honor student, I didn't want nobody who was special ed in the classroom with me because it made me feel different. But as you look at the bigger picture, you can run down the street in the world today, the smartest person in the world might have a disability that we not know about.

So, you can put them together and they can learn from each other. So, I feel that everybody should be granted with that opportunity.

Looney: Is there a way you incorporate your experience with your home life growing up –

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with these students? Like, the experiences that you had.

Nikisha Greer: I basically know that they – I guess we're teaching – the biggest ___ that I had with this area is that my students parents went to school with me. So, these are the same parents – these same students who had kids when I was in school, their kids are now I'm teaching. So, it try to tell them that “Everything that you did, I done did it before” and that there's always a consequence for each action. So, if I decided not to learn today, it'll affect me in the future when it's come to me for time to fill out an application for McDonalds. If I don't know how to spell a name or write my name, I can't get this job.

So besides teaching them, I try to teach them life skills too, that in order to survive in this world, it's not simple as being part of the system anymore.

Looney: How do you – well, personally, how do you benefit from programs like this or doing work like this?

Nikisha Greer: I guess it's my calling from God, you know? I –

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believe that he put me on her. I'm soft. I come off as this hard shell, but really, I'm soft. I guess just my goal is to try to help and save any and everybody that I can. So, right now, I'm working on trying to revitalize this neighborhood.

Although I don't stay over here – but my mom does – my goal is to try to do any and everything to try to keep these kids from seeing that I don't have to live this path. There's another journey that I can take. But it's up to me to determine if I'm going left or I'm gonna go right.

Williams: What did you like most about working with the special ed kids?

Nikisha Greer: I guess the best thing I like is, like I said, the personalities. You didn't know what to expect each day. So, like, I had a student who was emotionally disturbed. I might come to work very angry and upset but she might do something that'll make me laugh to get my day going. So, their personalities help pave me the person who I am today.

Looney: You said you were taking – you were doing things to help to improve –

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the community. Did you mean that outside – something outside of the special ed? What did you –?

Nikisha Greer: Yes. Basically, we have this things called the Height's Coalition. Basically, we went to Washington in January to meet with the top people in Washington so we met with department over housing, education and we met with these folks to address our issues that we're having. So, basically, the issue that we were trying to address now is the abandoned houses over here in Mitchell Height's.

So, with these abandoned houses, we looked at it's correlated to education. The more like – the troubles that these people are

having in the houses with the landlords and stuff; it's affecting the kids as they're going to school. So, if my mom has been struggling to pay rent from this slumlord – I'm paying \$1,000.00 for a house that's worth only like, \$200.00 or \$300.00. I might can't eat the next day. So, our goal is trying to fix these abandoned houses and turn it into outlets for the kids. So, we're trying to build a house where the kids can go and retreat after school to –

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get a meal before they go home to do extra activities like homework and everything like that.

Williams: What problems do you think the youths still face today at home?

Nikisha Greer: I guess the biggest problem they face at home is raising themselves. Like, I raised myself, but the challenges they have today – say, when I was 12, it's different from when they're 12. They might have two or three siblings. I'm the youngest of five so I didn't have to raise nobody else but myself. So, they have the choices of raising younger siblings and they don't know how to make decisions themselves. So, that's the biggest challenge that I feel.

Looney: When you say, “raising themselves” – why do you think these kids have to raise themselves in the first place?

Nikisha Greer: Because once again, like, I guess my experience with the kids in the classroom period, their parents' never around. Like, I rarely – I literally had to get in my car to go get paperwork signed from parents because –

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they wouldn't come up to the school. And they'll come to school and tell me, “Well, my mom's not there.” Or, “I didn't eat last night” and things of that nature. Or “I don't have shoes or clothes or soap or hygiene things.” So, my goal was to try to get it for them.

So, that let me know that basically, you're fending for yourself once you leave school. The only shelter you have is for the seven hours you are with us. And that's why they acted out more is because they didn't have that outlet of getting a hug when they get home and things of that nature. I was able to cope with that but

with this – with so much going on in their environment and them being pulled left and right to gangs and stuff, they just frustrated.

Looney: How often do you interact with the parents?

Nikisha Greer: Well, with special ed in general, you have to interact once a year but I try to contact the parents weekly to let them know the progress of how their kid is doing and what they need. That means if I have to come to their job, I'll go to their job. If I gotta come to their house, I'll go to their house. Anything that I can do. So, with me working with the Height's Coalition –

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our goal is trying to do like, these block parties and everything to get their parents out. They'll come out, but they're not receptive of continuing to come out to express their needs.

Williams: What achievements do you see in the special ed kids?

Nikisha Greer: The achievements I see is that they actually can learn. Like, over the past four years, my students have moved tremendously based on standardized testing. So, they had this persona, a label on top of them, and I let them know that just 'cause you were labeled that doesn't mean you have to live up to it. I was labeled as – I was told by my guidance counselor that I wouldn't be anything. I was the first person in my class to graduate from college and I have three degrees. But I don't put that out there on the table but if somebody told me I couldn't, that was my fuel to keep on going.

Williams: What do you think the kids need the most personally and academically?

Nikisha Greer: Personally, they need a foundation, somebody to be there for them.

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And academically, they need, I guess the foundations of basics. Some kids are in the eighth grade – they cannot read on a first grade level. So, my biggest thing is how can we let a kid go from kindergarten all the way to eighth grade and still not learn? So –

Looney: This is special ed.

Nikisha Greer: Special ed, right. So, basically, I think that the foundation for the basics should be drilled in them continuously. Even though they're in the eighth grade level, on eighth grade, they still need the basics.

Looney: So, do you think that they're just passing through the school system?

Nikisha Greer: Yes.

Looney: Okay. Could you tell us more about the Coalition and the goal? Just how they actively, you know...

Nikisha Greer: Well, the coalition basically is we were supposed to basically survey the neighborhood and try to figure out what the community wants. The biggest thing that we're having is, nobody's coming out addressing their needs. So, we cannot choose something for them. We just basically go off the few surveys that we have.

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In the end, if the Coalition successfully does write through this process of different steps to get the grant, Mitch Heights will receive up to \$2 million to revitalize the neighborhood. But the catch of it is we're not having the stakeholders come out and express their issues. Like, we had a community meeting last night which was great. We had up to like 25 community people come but like the pastor said last night, it's not race related. The neighborhood over here is predominantly Hispanic and black but you didn't have that many black and Hispanic's there to address their needs and concerns.

Looney: And why do you think they're not coming out? Do they not care or are they not aware?

Nikisha Greer: I think it their fear. A person who has an education level and somebody who doesn't, I would be inferior of somebody who can say things that I can't. And that's basically like the **Izon** came to Treadwell. Those educators –

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got up there and said stuff way above the parents' head. Where these parents are down here and the educators up here, they never tried to put it in between so they could understand what was going on. All they knew was we were getting taken over but they didn't know the reason why. So, I guess the terminology is the biggest thing.

Looney: I guess what strategies are you all looking to improve how you send the message out to the parents and the communities?

Nikisha Greer: We send flyers out. We try to hold block parties and have like, little surveys there to have the parents fill out to get their instant feedback because we put the two and two together. If we feed the community, they're come out. So, we're trying to – as we do our part, we're trying to get them to give us feedback.

Looney: And what church are you working with?

Nikisha Greer: The Height's is basically their own thing, their own entity. It's not correlated to a church. We just used the community and the resource just together to assist.

Looney: Okay, 'cause I heard you say “pastor” so I guess –

Nikisha Greer: We went to the community at Leawood Baptist Church last night.

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So, Pastor Burt.

Looney: Do you think that maybe having a sort of religious based or I guess, a religious leader type figure to – 'cause I would think that I guess, since this is mostly and African American/Hispanic community that they might be like, at least, a religious group of people? Do you think that they would be more drawn to that or?

Nikisha Greer: I guess that – you would think that in a straight face America, you would think that there would be. But I guess with this community, you see so many pastors did the people wrong – like, stole their money and everything. So, so many people are not receptive of churches as others are. So, you have – like I said, Brooklyn Height's been over here. They came in and did great things. And like I said, City Builders, before the Hispanic, took over the church across the street. They had great intentions –

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but like I said, the community has this – one set mind that, “They'll do me wrong” and they won't be receptive of it, so it's like a double-edged sword. It would be great, but the community's not receptive.

Looney: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your involvement in the community or growing up here?

Nikisha Greer: Just basically, I love my community. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be who I am today. I tried. I was told I wasn't gonna be anything and I overcame. I guess I was the diamond in the rough that came out and shined. You gotta take it how you want to receive it. If you put your mind to it, you can be whatever you want to be.

Looney: I'd like to thank you for coming out and sharing your story with us today.

Nikisha Greer: All right.

Hibbert: I was just wondering, how do you feel about leaving Treadwell to go teach somewhere else after going there so long as a student and then becoming –

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a teacher there?

Nikisha Greer: I basically was hurt. I thought I'd be at Treadwell till I was 60 or 70. I been there throughout the transformation. But you know, I guess it's in God's plan that he wanted me to go somewhere else and take my talents. But being in this environment, I still will be involved with the kids from Treadwell even though I'll be around the corner, but it hurt. I guess that was my breaking point for this –

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