

Britney Looney: Hello. My name is Britney Looney.

Prince Williams: And my name is Prince Williams.

Britney Looney: 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.

Elliot Perry: Thank you.

Britney Looney: We're gonna start with a few biographical questions. May I ask your name?

Elliot Perry: Elliot Perry.

Britney Looney: What year were you born?

Elliot Perry: I was born in 1969.

Prince Williams: Can you tell us your occupation?

Elliot Perry: Currently I work for the Poplar Foundation.

Britney Looney: What is the Poplar Foundation?

Elliot Perry: Poplar Foundation is a private foundation. Basically we support all of our supporters around just giving kids an opportunity to get a quality education regardless of where they come from. So for me it's been a great reward to work there knowing that we're giving kids an opportunity who otherwise wouldn't have that same opportunity to have access to a quality education.

Britney Looney: This is Popular or Poplar?

Elliot Perry: Poplar.

Britney Looney: Like the street Poplar?

Elliot Perry: Like the street.

Britney Looney: Where were you born and raised?

Elliot Perry: Born and raised right here in Memphis. I was born, again like I said, 1969 here in Memphis. I grew up in north Memphis not far from here.

Britney Looney: Could you tell us a little bit about your home life growing up here in Memphis?

Elliot Perry: So, again, 1969. I always tell this story. My mom was 15 years old when she had me. So I still grew up in a great family in terms of my grandparents being able to help my mom raise me. Grew up in a loving household, but I always like to say I grew up in a community that really liked to take hold of our young people and hold our young people until ultimately they conform to the community ways.

So for me, it's just been about support of my family and support of other people in my community, my mentor. All those people who

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-- helped me see more than just my environment.

Britney Looney: Who would you say would be the most influential person growing up?

Elliot Perry: Outside of my family, I would say the guy who mentored me, Michael Tony was a guy who lived up the street from me. He was a freshman at the time at Memphis State.

Just by chance we struck up a conversation. I was in the fifth grade. Just saw something interesting in me and started coming back and forth down the street to my house. Asked my mom could he just talk to me and started asking me about college. Really exposing me to a lot of things outside of my community. Really started to challenge me on my potential and helped me build the confidence in myself that was always there.

So I would say he was the biggest influence on my life. Michael Tony really just really changed the course of the way I thought about what I can do, the possibilities of what I can do and then --

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-- helped me exceed that in doing those things.

Britney Looney: Do you still keep in touch with him?

Elliot Perry: Oh yes.

Prince Williams: Where did you go to elementary school?

Elliot Perry: So, it's kinda' crazy. Back then they were doing a little bit of busing back then. So I went for my kindergarten, I went to Springdale Elementary. Then we were bused to Macon Road Elementary. Then I went back to Springdale for third/fourth grade. Then I got bused to **Berkeley** for fifth/sixth grade. Then I went to Treadwell 7th through 12th.

Britney Looney: Well, I know. Just describe to us where Springdale is located and about your experience during the busing.

Elliot Perry: Springdale is in north Memphis so that was our neighborhood elementary school. It's right off of Hollywood and Jackson. So right on the corner of Hollywood and Jackson. Fantastic school. Had fantastic teachers at Springdale.

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So that was a great experience for me because we were able to walk to the school and then all of your friends are at the school because it's a neighborhood school.

My first and second grade year I got bused to Macon Road. So, that was a big experience. I'd never actually going to school with White people. So going out there was a big experience for us and a learning experience. Felt like we were – I don't know – a thousand miles away from home, but it ended up being a great experience. I learned a lot at Macon Road.

Refreshing to come back again in the third and fourth grade. Back to your neighborhood school, which was Springdale. Then fifth/sixth grade I was bused to **Berkeley** Elementary School. Again, another great experience at Berkeley Elementary School and then having the opportunity to come to Treadwell 7th through 12th. So I didn't have to move schools again was a great experience as well.

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Britney Looney: Do you know where you would have gone if that didn't happen or you didn't go to Springdale if busing hadn't happened at _____ --?

Elliot Perry: Oh. I would have gone to Springdale. Springdale was an elementary school that went through I wanna say fourth grade. Fifth/sixth grade I probably woulda' gone to – I have to think about

that, but seventh, eighth, ninth grade I probably woulda' gone to Cypress and then ultimately my high school years I would have spent at Northside High School.

Prince Williams: Do you feel like Treadwell was a family when you were there?

Elliot Perry: I do. I had great experiences at Treadwell. I think when you talk about family, being there from 7th grade to 12th grade I was able to really experience a broader scope of school in general. Usually there are two schools where you go to middle school, sixth, seventh and eighth grade now.

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I was able to go from 7th to 12th grade and being able to interact with some of the seniors there and being able to learn. Obviously if I hadn't played basketball there, that gave me a great opportunity to have another family, but the teachers there were fantastic. The principal was fantastic. Again, just helped me build a foundation.

Britney Looney: Could you describe your time from 7th to 12th grade at Treadwell? The activities you were involved in, what you did while you were there.

Elliot Perry: Obviously I played basketball while I was there. I was in drama club with Ms. Roach in drama club. I know I don't look like a drama person, but I was. That was a great experience. It took me outside of myself. That was something I wasn't used to doing. It was a whole other world for me, but it challenged me and she really challenged me. So I have a lot of respect for Ms. Roach. She put in a lot of work with the people there.

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But my fondest memories at Treadwell is the teachers. Teachers who really cared. Teachers who really put in the extra time. You mentioned a family atmosphere. Teachers had thought that they were there for extended periods of time. I could run off 10 to 12 teachers right now who all played a major part in helping me develop as a person.

So if I had to run off those teachers, obviously my high school coach was one of those teachers, a history teacher, but you look at some of the other coaches. Football coaches, Coach **Bersong**, but Ms. Turner who was a guidance counselor, Ms. Lewis who was my 12th grade English teacher. Ms. Chandler. It doesn't look like I

took home ec, but I did take home economics. So Ms. Chandler was great. Ms. Manahan, my algebra teacher. Mr. Bronson, tenth

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-- grade English teacher was fantastic. I think he was the guy who really helped shape and mold me 'cause that's the one teacher I did not want to take. Having to take him, he really challenged me and I rose to the occasion.

Britney Looney: What years did you go to Treadwell?

Elliot Perry: So I started Treadwell in '82 and then graduated in '87.

Britney Looney: '87, okay. Backtracking a little, could you tell us how you first got into sports? Who encouraged you? Who were your role models as far as sports goes? How did you get into that type of atmosphere?

Elliot Perry: Just growing up in north Memphis, we always played sports. So we were always a part of some team. So we always played sports in the summertime and throughout the year, but I'd never really played organized sports until I started playing organized basketball.

So Michael Tony was the really first one, again, who started to –

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-- really challenge me around this whole basketball piece and then got me started in playing AAU basketball and playing more organized basketball.

I tried out for my Treadwell team in the seventh grade. Got cut in the seventh grade so I didn't play that year. Worked out in the summertime. Played with older guys. Got a little better and then tried out again in the eighth grade. My eighth grade year made the basketball team and then split time playing what they called back then the B team and then split time, had an opportunity to dress for the A team. I didn't play a lot.

So that's just how I got started. Just being around the community and playing basketball in my neighborhood and then ultimately playing organized basketball. Then after that just kept getting better and better every year and just fortunate enough to be able to play in college.

Britney Looney: What other types of activities that were offered to Treadwell –

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-- students and other kids around the community at the time? What kept them occupied or even yourself, what kept them occupied while they were growing up?

Elliot Perry: I think all sports. People played baseball. Most of my friends played football as well. Obviously basketball was a big piece of it, but we would also go to the Ira Samuelson Boys' Club right up the street and play basketball after school.

So that was an opportunity for us to really just get together as a community, go play basketball. It was nothin' really serious, but it gave us an opportunity to be off the streets.

Prince Williams: When we were at the library and we were looking through the yearbooks, we saw that you were Mr. Treadwell. I just wanted to know how did you feel about it?

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Elliot Perry: I felt great. It was always kinda' funny because that's something you have to run for and politic for. You have to make signs and you have to do all these things around school to try to get people to vote for you. I didn't really wanna put in a lot of that time, but I did.

I think somebody convinced me to run for Mr. Treadwell. I did. I had people helping me basically politic around school to try to help me win Mr. Treadwell. Again, that was another opportunity to challenge myself and to step out of my comfort zone. I felt great when I won.

Britney Looney: Would you say you were pretty popular in high school?

Elliot Perry: Yeah, I would say I was pretty popular in high school. When I say popular, I mean just I knew people knew me, but I always felt –

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-- like I was just a normal regular student. I always wanted to be a part of the crowd. I always wanted to be active. I never wanted to just stand alone or stand out.

Britney Looney: I would say it just followed suit. You doing what you love to do and just – well just all your extracurricular activities, personality, things that you like to do I guess molded how people saw you.

Elliot Perry: Yeah. I think people just see me as a normal person. At the time, well I didn't feel like people saw me as this super star basketball player. I just thought people saw me as a normal person. I think people felt like they can approach me at any time. Again, like I said, I always wanted to be in the crowd. I always participated –

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-- in things outside of the classroom with my fellow students. So yeah, I think all those things helped shape and mold me.

Britney Looney: Are there any other stories about your time I guess in the north Memphis area and at Treadwell that we didn't really get a chance to cover? But do you have any stories, experiences that you haven't covered yet?

Elliot Perry: That's a tough one, but I think just the history of Treadwell was always attractive to me. I have aunts who graduated from Treadwell. So I have a couple of aunts who graduated from Treadwell. My mentor, the guy who mentored me, he graduated from Treadwell. So in our neighborhood I knew a number of people who had graduated from Treadwell. So that was the school I was familiar with.

When I got there I was very comfortable because we had a lot of people who were still there that I knew in our neighborhood who –

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-- I looked up to. Some fantastic athletes. Some fantastic students. So those people who I looked up to being a seventh grader coming there, they really wrapped their arms around me and just helped me, guided me through my time at Treadwell. So those things I remember.

I'll always remember, again, the teachers. A lot of the students that I graduated with and even went to school with, we still keep in touch, but my high school coach, he's not with us today, but very instrumental in helping shape and mold me. Stayed on us hard, but it paid off. So I'm proud to have had him as a coach.

Prince Williams: What were the athletic events like at Treadwell?

Elliot Perry: I think the athletics were great. We had some great teams. We –

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-- had great players come through Treadwell. Just if I had to name, just players who just come right through my head from a basketball standpoint, we had Hank McDowell come through. He ended up playing at Memphis State at the time and then playing ten years in the NBA.

Anthony Hardaway came through. Obviously probably the biggest and best basketball player to come through Memphis, played at Treadwell. We had an opportunity to play together in high school. Chris Garner who played a year in the NBA, but ended up playing at Memphis at the time. Robbie Randolph.

I can probably go back further, but those were just some of the great players that came through the school.

There were a lot of other players on the football side that came through the school and baseball side. Athletics there were great.

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Britney Looney: When you finally made the A team, what was the team like? What was maybe your record, the team environment, the coach?

Elliot Perry: So when I started on the A team I was a freshman in high school. I started on the A team. So the guys that I was playing with were all upper classmen guys. So these guys were in the 11th, 12th grade. I was the only young guy on the team. So that was rewarding in itself, but those were all the guys I looked up to.

That was a special team for me because that team helped shape and mold me because those guys, they really rolled me hard, but I think they respected the fact that I came back every day. I put in a lot of the work. My coach rolled me hard. Being a young guy, knowing that that was gonna be a critical position to play for a young ninth grader on the team. So that team was very special to me.

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One funny story about that team is that was a very good basketball team. We had a chance to go to either state or the sub-state. I

can't remember, but anyway, we had gone on a good run. We were winning basketball games.

So we got to the point where we were going to play in I wanna say the sub-state game. You felt a little loose. At least I felt a little loose because we had won a lot of games. Prior to going to that game we were going to play Tech High School that weekend. So I'm just shooting around in practice. At the end of practice, everybody split out on all the goals and you shot free throws.

Well, just ironic that that day I'm just playing around shooting free throws. We're just laughing and joking around. Our high school coach said, "Hey look, you guys need to take these free throws –

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-- serious. Telling ya', it may come down to a free throw in this game."

I never will forget. I told my high school coach, shooting way off on the free throw line, "Coach, don't worry. Just relax." He stayed on us.

We played Tech High School that Friday night. Ironically, it came down to me shooting free throws at the end of the game. Unfortunately, I missed the free throws that probably coulda' sent us to the state tournament. So I always remember that. That's why I always was motivated to really work hard and pay attention to details.

Britney Looney: What year were you when that happened?

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Elliot Perry: I was a freshman.

Britney Looney: You were a freshman. Okay. So how did that mold the upcoming seasons that were to come? What did you learn from?

Elliot Perry: So what I learned from that is, again, paying attention to detail. So I always really took all of these things serious when I was at practice because to me the thing is practice makes perfect, but it really does.

I always felt bad for the seniors that were on that basketball team. That it came down to a freshman. Ultimately, I always still say

ultimately I lost the basketball game for our team. I think that motivated me that summer to really put in the work to get better as a basketball player, to pay attention to detail and just come out there next year all guns blazing and try to be the best basketball player I could. Not just for that next year, but just throughout my whole career.

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Britney Looney: Did that team ever return to state?

Elliot Perry: We had an opportunity again in my senior year to go to the state tournament. We lost a game not the same way, but one game before going to the state tournament.

Britney Looney: Do you remember who that team was?

Elliot Perry: Yeah, I remember that team. I remember that team well. Anthony Hardaway, Penny Hardaway was on that basketball team. Some other guys you probably won't remember, but it was a very good basketball team. We were tops in the city and really slated to go to state. Unfortunately, we didn't.

Britney Looney: Could you describe to us your time after Treadwell? You went to college.

Elliot Perry: Yes.

Britney Looney: What school did you go to?

Elliot Perry: I went to Memphis State, but University of Memphis now at the time. I signed with them out of college to play basketball on a basketball scholarship. So I played there from '87 to '91.

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Graduated in '91. So that was a great experience as well. Being the first person in my family to go to college.

Even more special is being able to go to college without my mom or anybody in my family having to pay for it. So, I took that opportunity very serious because I knew that I could set an example for the young people in my family coming behind me to realize that education is the foundation of it all. So I challenged myself to graduate in four years and I did it.

Prince Williams: What did you study in college?

Elliot Perry: I studied business marketing. Business was always interesting to me for a variety of reasons, but just marketing was always interesting to me because I always looked at it from a sports perspective.

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So seeing guys like Michael Jordan and Barclay and Magic Johnson and seeing how these guys were marketed, that just stuck with me. So I majored in marketing.

Prince Williams: Can you tell us how you got involved in the NBA?

Elliot Perry: So after I graduated in '91, I got drafted in the NBA in the 2nd round, the 37th pick in the 2nd round by the Los Angeles Clippers. So I went from Memphis to L.A. After the 12th or 13th game in L.A. I got waived. So I got cut off of that basketball team.

Then when I cleared waivers, I got picked up by the Charlotte Hornets. So I spent the rest of my rookie year in Charlotte, which was a great experience. I met some great people, played with some great players, built some great friendships in Charlotte.

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Then that next year I spent my full year in the Continental Basketball Association. So I played the first part of it in Lacrosse, Wisconsin. Then I got traded to Rochester, Minnesota where I spent the full year in Rochester. So that summer I played in a summer league with the Portland Trailblazers. Played well.

So that next year, my rights got traded from Rochester, Minnesota to Grand Rapids, Michigan. I played 20 games in Grand Rapids and got called up to the Phoenix Suns and, again, the rest was history. I stayed there for four years in Phoenix. I got traded from Phoenix to Milwaukee where I played three additional years and then got traded to New Jersey where I played two additional years. So, carved out a ten-year career for myself.

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So, again, a lot of that was just God's blessing on my life. I knew I was a good basketball player, but I never felt like I was a great basketball player, but I worked hard. I had a positive attitude. Just

God's grace and mercy he saw fit to put me in a situation where I played ten years in the NBA. So it was nothin' special on my part.

Britney Looney: Did you ever want to extend your time with the NBA?

Elliot Perry: Oh yeah. Who doesn't wanna play? I wanted to play as many years as I could, but that time comes for all of us. I don't care who you are. I had always said that when I stopped putting in a ton of time in the summertime with going to camp in shape, making sure my body was in shape, that I lost the passion for it, but just through various injuries with my hip and some other things, it was time.

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Britney Looney: Could you talk about your last two games with Memphis?

Elliot Perry: Yeah, I can talk about that. So when I had decided to retire in the latter part of that year, that next basketball season I got a ten-day contract with the Memphis Grizzlies. So that was strange because I just got called out of the blue. I had considered myself retired.

I went in and I played five games with them, but I only got in two of those basketball games. So that was rewarding because I was fortunate enough to wear the jersey of my home NBA team, albeit for a short period of time

So I played high school here. I played college here. Then I played a couple of games in the NBA here. So that was rich and –

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-- rewarding. That time for me was just, albeit again short, it was a special time.

Britney Looney: Would you describe it as the most rewarding or memorable moment of your entire career or would you say something else?

Elliot Perry: No, I wouldn't say that that was the most memorable moment of my career. There are a lot of memorable moments. Signing a long-term contract was a memorable moment, but just from a basketball standpoint, I played with some great players. Kevin Johnson, Charles Barclay. Having an opportunity to go to the playoffs with those guys and learned from guys like Danny Ainge and Dan Marley and A.C. Green who was my locker partner.

I just think that a lot of those were the most memorable moments for me. I could sit here and say my most memorable moments were on the basketball court, but I think a lot of them were off the basketball court.

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Again, having a relationship with A.C. Green and him to just galvanize me more in Christ.

Having a relationship with Charles Barclay. The guy has a special, special heart. If he likes you, he likes you. If he doesn't like you he's gonna tell you he doesn't like you. So having that relationship was fantastic.

Kevin Johnson, I learned a lot from him off the court. He's the mayor of Sacramento now. He was always a really driven guy. He always cared about the community. He always gave his time and energy. I really thought that he was a forward thinking guy. So I learned a lot from that perspective from Kevin Johnson. I learned a lot from a lot of guys on the court.

Another memorable moment was having an opportunity to play with Penny Hardaway my last year in Phoenix. So that was somebody who I played with in high school, watched have a magnificent NBA career and then having an opportunity to play –

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--with him in the NBA was special as well.

Britney Looney:

You said you toward the end of your career lost a passion for playing. Did you replace that with another passion? Describe your transition.

Elliot Perry:

My transition. I think on the court I had a real passion for basketball. I put in a lot of time and I always played hard. I never took a night off.

In the summertime I'd always had a passion to come back to my community and give the most precious gift God had given me and that was my time. So I would always give my time and resources in the summertime.

So now having an opportunity to come back home to Memphis has been really special because I'm working with some fantastic

people. More importantly, I'm working with fantastic kids and organizations to really better Memphis.

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My thing was is that I think about the way I grew up and where I grew up. The one thing about education in the community that I grew up in is you can't attach it to anything. You can't make education the most important thing because what people see in their community is where is it beneficial, what is it going to do for me.

So, education I always say is kind of looking at a painting. It's just abstract. There are no figures. You can't carve out anything. To be back home and to have the opportunity to, one, talk to kids about that and parents, but more importantly than talking, giving them the opportunity to have a choice to go to great schools, --

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-- have great teachers and saying that the status quo is not acceptable. I think for me that's been the most rewarding thing is seeing young people get the foundation they really need.

Britney Looney:

So outside of education, what would you say is also something that youth can benefit from that can also guide them to a greater goal in the future?

Elliot Perry:

I think a couple of things. I think, one, obviously I would always say sports. I think sports is a teacher in itself in a lot of ways. Not just basketball, but all sports. It teaches you to be a good teammate. It teaches you to be committed. It teaches you to have to sacrifice. Some players are very good players, but it just may not be your time at that time. You have to sacrifice.

So it teaches you all those things. How to be on time. Come early, stay late. All of those different things.

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The other thing is the whole mentoring piece. I think that the mentoring piece is so important because it gives kids another voice that can support them outside of their home.

Right now I've been working with, as the vice-chair of the Memphis Grizzlies Foundation, we've built our platform around

mentoring. The reason we've chosen to do that is it's one thing to just give away resources. As an NBA franchise and organization, you can always give away resources, but how can you make a tangible difference. That's really putting responsible adults in front of our young people and giving them an opportunity to have that other person in their life that they can bounce ideas off of, that can support them, that can –

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-- challenge them, that can hold them to high expectations outside of their mom and dad.

Britney Looney: Is the Poplar Foundation separate from the Memphis Grizzlies?

Elliot Perry: Yes.

Britney Looney: Okay. Are there any other organizations that you're involved in?

Elliot Perry: A lot of organizations in different schools, but a lot of them, to mention name, but from Memphis Athletic Ministries to **Streets** Ministries to Leadership Empowerment Center in Frasier. We deal with a lot of those organizations. Girls, Inc. A lot of those organizations, but we also support education around pride to schools, support education around charter schools.

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The whole thing is just in giving kids and parents an opportunity for choice. If one school is not working for you, you have a choice to go to another school. That's something that predominantly we haven't had in our communities, whether school is a good school or bad school. If it is a bad school, probably woulda' been like my mom. Just going to the school that's closest to you, that's easiest to get to.

So I think what charter schools have done and other schools, some of the private schools in our city, is it's like competition. My hope is that parents will take advantage of it.

Britney Looney: So do you think that the merger between the city and county schools, do you feel that this is a better opportunity for the students and the quality of their education?

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Elliot Perry: I think it is. I think this is an opportunity to not just duplicate the same services. To me education is not territorial. I wanna see every kid in our community have an opportunity to be at a good, quality school. Joining forces I think will help in a lot of ways. One, from a resource standpoint and, two, it's just the right thing to do is not be separate in terms of our education. It's really to be together, really to find the best teachers, really to find the best leadership, really to find the best person for the job and let those people do their jobs.

Britney Looney: So, you are aware of the situation with Treadwell as it is now. The high school is no longer there. Could you describe your feelings about that?

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Elliot Perry: I guess it's a, for lack of a word, I guess it's kind of a love/hate thing. Obviously you would hope that it'd continue to be a high school and have the opportunity to continue to graduate great graduates to go on to college, but that's just a part of looking at the district as a whole and making the right choices in terms of schools.

I think it's still Treadwell to me, but it's just a middle school. Hopefully the elementary school and the middle school give kids a great foundation for going into high school.

So again, like I said, I wish it could be a high school, but it's not, but I'm totally on board with it.

Prince Williams: How did religion play a part in your life?

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Elliot Perry: Very much. Like I said before, it's just been, again, through God's grace and mercy that I've had the opportunities I've had. So I try to be really aware I'm not taking the credit for anything that's happened to me.

So I continue to be a part of a church body, body of Christ, but again, more importantly is I don't wanna just be a church person. I really wanna be able to, like I said before, give the most precious gift God has given me. It's something that I can never get back. You can never get your time back. So how I utilize my time is –

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-- always important. Hopefully that time that I'm using is hopefully satisfactory to him.

Britney Looney: What church did you attend while you were growing up here, if you had a church home?

Elliot Perry: Early Grove Baptist Church over in **Binghampton**.

Britney Looney: Does anybody have _____?

Do you have any more stories that you'd like to share with us about your time growing up here in the north Memphis area and Treadwell?

Elliot Perry: I think we've pretty much hit everything.

Britney Looney: These are our upcoming seventh grade Treadwell students. They'll be the first students to be under the attention of the new principal that's coming in after _____. So do you have any words of encouragement for these students?

Elliot Perry: Yeah. I do have some words of encouragement for these students is, one, this for me has been a real valuable experience. Not just doing this interview and talking about Treadwell and talking a little bit about my history, but to have young people drive the conversation and drive the ship.

This is an opportunity to build relationships, to become a better person, to step out of your comfort zone, but I think even more important is that this is the opportunity to continue to build that solid foundation. That solid foundation for me is education. So take your education serious. Do the very best that you can and don't try to shortcut.

Britney Looney: Thank you for your time and coming in and sharing your story with us today. We really do appreciate it.

Male: Thank you.

[Interview ends at 38:57; remaining 38:57 on audio is duplicate of interview]

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