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Prince Williams: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and the Corners of Highland Heights, I wanted to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Prince Williams.

Alison Henry: And I'm Alison Henry.

Prince Williams: And today's date is June 25th, 2014, and we are located at Highland Heights Methodist Church, and I'm honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. To start with some biographical information, may you tell us your name?

Wayne Cook: My name is Wayne Cook.

Prince Williams: Can you tell us what year you were born?

Wayne Cook: I was born July 10, 1942.

Prince Williams: Can you tell us a little bit about where you were born and raised?

Wayne Cook: Actually I was born in Helen, Arkansas, so in the delta. And I was there till probably around seven, eight years old, and we moved to Memphis.

Prince Williams: Can you tell me, what's your occupation?

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Wayne Cook: Yeah. My career has been in IT, information technology. I started out as a computer programmer and manager back in the '60s, a long time ago. And I became what they now call the chief information officer at First Tennessee Bank, and that was back in the early '70s. And from there I left and – I left a world of IT management and I got into sales. I used to have a gift of gabbing, and people used to tell me, "Man, you need to be in sales." So I left the management side of IT and got into the sales side, but it gave me a great grounding of what IT is really – what it means to large institutions.

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So I switched over to sales, and I sell computers – large multi-million dollar computers and networks. And then one day it just dawned on me, "I'll do this myself." So I founded my own

company, and today we're a national – headquartered in Memphis. We're a national IT software development company. We have hundreds of employees around the country. We buy companies and blend them into my firm, but we – we work for large companies like FedEx. You all know FedEx.

Probably a lot of their applications that they use to run their business – a lot of Cook people – my company's Cook Systems International, and a lot of Cook people work on all their projects, and have for years: over 20 years. So that's what I do: I'm the founder, and president, and chairman of Cook Systems International.

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Prince Williams: Can you tell me what it's like?

Wayne Cook: What it's like to do that?

Prince Williams: Yes, sir.

Wayne Cook: It keeps you up at night *[laughter]*. It's exhilarating. It's fun. It's spooky sometimes when you're the – you hear it's lonely at the top: it really is lonely at the top. But I will tell you, it's been extremely rewarding, especially these days. We're in the twilight of my career, 'cause I'm now 71, and I'm looking at wrapping things up and maybe – we're working towards Wayne retiring and selling the company to a larger company. And so one of the things that is extremely interesting to me is guys like you, and putting back into my community what I've taken from it.

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And so I've been very involved in something – we call it FastTrack now. And if you know a little bit about how jobs have been shifting offshore, a lot of our jobs have gone offshore. The manufacturing went first. Is the kind of stuff you wanna know? Okay. The software industry started shipping jobs offshore, so we were on the verge of losing our brain trust for doing software. Americans are great at software, and all of a sudden you see an influx of H1Bs and people coming from India, and China, and everywhere else; and they're coming here, and they're taking our work, and they're taking it over there. And so that bothers me, and we have needs for jobs here.

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We need our people who are potentially great at doing job to simply know that – and job – when I say job, I mean IT – and get them back into the workflow. So I created this program we call FastTrack, and it's a national business model. And essentially what I do is I cast a really wide net over the country, and I look for people with the right aptitude. They applied themselves in school, they took math, they're good abstract thinkers, and I can find you. If you're hiding out there somewhere, if I can get you to my website, I can test you and dialogue with you with my website, and I can get you in a class, and I can teach you Java, and turn you into a developer. And we can compete with offshore, and we're doing that today, and we're creating lots of jobs here in Memphis doing that.

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We're also doing it in Dallas, Texas and Columbus, Ohio, and Atlanta. And recently also, our – we're using the same model to help veterans of military. We're gonna do one in Dallas next end of July, and it's a full class of military veterans, and then we'll run them through this course. It's a two-month course. It's tough; it's a boot camp. And so we'll run them through it, they get jobs, and we'll put them to work in our customer base around Dallas, and San Antonio, and such. But the thing I'm trying to say is, we're creating a model that competes with offshore. It's priced right and it gives people the opportunity to get into technical careers, and that's kinda what I wanna – wrap my career up doing that kinda thing, and I love it.

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And it's inspiring to see people that used to work at a Starbucks now be on the path to a, in three years, \$70,000/\$80,000 a year career, and be proud of what they're doing, and that means more to me than probably anything I've done.

Prince Williams: Can you tell me what your parents were like?

Wayne Cook: My mom was great. She was my mom and my dad. My dad, I never really knew him, and he was killed when I was young. But I had a great mom, and she gave – she passed onto me right and wrong, and she would box my ears. You know what that is, right? No, they don't know what that [laughter] – well, let me just say that she had the rod of discipline [laughter]. And she had a house full of boys, and she ran us hard and – but she was a great mom.

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She taught us discipline, and I – when I went to college, I knew right from wrong, and I tried to stay out of trouble. And I was a mischievous guy, too. It was my reputation that _____
[laughter].

Prince Williams: Can you tell me what it was like growing up with a house full of boys?

Wayne Cook: It was crazy, and it always made me want a daughter when I got married to get away from all those boys. And God gave me a boy – I mean a girl, and – but it was fun. I had four younger brothers, and I had two older brothers, and I had two older sisters that were already gone. But it – I was the baby of the first family, and my mom married again and had four children. So I got to be in charge of them, and that was a hell of a lot of fun. It was fun. It was good. I love all my brothers.

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Prince Williams: Can you tell me what their occupations are?

Wayne Cook: Yeah. Almost all of them were in the trucking industry. My father, who I never knew, he was a – he drove an 18-wheeler, and that's how he got killed. He hit a dirt embankment. And I had a stepfather: he was a truck driver. And so all my brothers wound up in the – some line of working for over-the-road driver except me. I'm the only one – I beat to a different drum. And I went to the Army, and when I came out, I went into the banking industry. That's how I got into IT.

Prince Williams: So we're gonna transition to education. Can you tell me what Middle School you went to?

Wayne Cook: Yeah, **Treble**.

Prince Williams: Can you tell me what it was like?

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Wayne Cook: Middle School?

Prince Williams: Yes, sir.

Wayne Cook: Well, when you hit the seventh grade at Treble in those days, I gotta say, it was a delightful time. I thoroughly enjoyed my time at school. Boys wore their collars up. There were tough guys. You had *[laughter]* – they wore their collars up. We wore black leather jackets. Everybody had jeans. We wore Levis – wouldn't wear anything but Levis. T-shirts – just a regular t-shirt. And when James Dean came along, we all bought red jackets. And so every boy had a red jacket, white t-shirt, and Levi jeans. And we wore our hair in some strange – extremely strange hairstyles.

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Mine was cut flat on top and I'd pull the hair right down on my forehead. And you've seen – if you guys have ever seen Fonzie, it was very similar to that. And I didn't have to worry about standing out and looking silly, because everybody did, and – but it was a great time. It was a great time. I still get together with all my friends in reunions, and they're pretty much all, thank God, still with me. A few of them are not, but we laugh about those pictures and how we were, but it was a good time to be alive. It was fun. It was a creative time, too. The music – at that time, Elvis was brand new. Elvis hit Memphis before he became a national phenomenon. And so he was a big – he was a huge star to us.

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And music before Elvis came along was quite boring, and the hit parades and pop music just wasn't that interesting to most of us kids. And most of us really weren't in country either, so Elvis just really knocked us. And then you had Jerry Lee Lewis and all those – and all the great black singers back then that came along: Clyde McFatter and – I bet know some you guys never heard of, but just – it was a great time, 'cause music was very creative. And there were story songs, and the melodies were enchanting and haunting. And they inspired us, and it was just a great time to be alive. It's a great time to have a girlfriend, a great time to be sweet on somebody, and cheating on tests *[laughter]*.

Alison Henry: Did you participate in any activities in middle school?

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Wayne Cook: No, I really didn't. I went to school and I went home. I really didn't. I did more in high school. I was in sports in high school.

Prince Williams: Can you tell me why they dressed like that?

Wayne Cook: It was the style. We liked it. We still like tight jeans. I mean, you may like loose jeans [laughter], but we like tight jeans. Some guys now, they wear all kinds, but there was a certain look we liked, and I think it was probably formed by Hollywood. And when I think of it, where else would we have gotten the idea? And by the way, there was a TV show, *Dance Party* – was it *Dance Party*? Who was the guy? Wink Martindale.

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And everybody – oh, no, on the one in Philadelphia. There was this national dance show every day, and you could – the first thing we would do is go home and we'd watch this dance party, and it was just full of different people and they were all in Philadelphia, and there were personalities on there. You knew the same dancers were gonna probably predominantly be there everyday, and we saw their dress. We saw what they wore, and they were usually a little ahead of us than Memphis. So we got it – we picked it up from there and then – same time, we would hustle home in those s debt.years, because *Mickey Mouse Club* had come on, and –

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