

[0:00:00]

Keyonté Morris-Loper: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, the Corner of Highland Heights, we want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Keyonté Morris-Loper.

Keleigh Henry: And I'm Keleigh Henry.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Today's date is July 9th at Rhodes College, 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. Introduction: let's start with some basic biographical questions to get your memory going. What is your name?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Melissa Monié – Melissa Miller-Monié.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: When were you born?

Melissa Miller-Monié: 1968.

[0:01:00]

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Where were you born and raised?

Melissa Miller-Monié: In Memphis, **Shelby** County.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What is your occupation?

Melissa Miller-Monié: I'm an outreach coordinator.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Could you tell me more about that?

Melissa Miller-Monié: An outreach coordinator, or an outreach organizer, is a person who — for myself, I work with the Highland Heights community with some of the community members who've lived here for a long time. Their interest was to reclaim their neighborhood. So what I do is I talk with them, and I see their concerns, and I organize with them. I set up a space for them to come and meet together. I bring in resources for them. And so in doing that, it allows them to meet people like Pastor Fred, or people at the school —

[0:02:01]

– police officers, people in city and county government; and so that’s kind of what the organizing part of it is. So if they don’t have a connection with those people, my job is to make sure that they get to know who represents them, like city council people from the city or the county. Does that help?

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Yes, ma’am. Who are your parents?

Melissa Miller-Monié: My mother’s name is Pearly Jefferson, and my father’s name was Calvin Smith.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What were their occupations?

Melissa Miller-Monié: My mother, she worked for many years at a place called Arlington Developmental Center, which was out in Arlington, Tennessee. It was a place where people who had mental challenges – in a nursing home setting, and some of the area was positioned like a home-style setting, and that’s where my mother worked.

[0:03:03]

She helped them develop their skills so that they can become more independent. My father was in the Air Force. He worked there for many years. He worked on aircrafts. He was one of the persons that worked on the Tuskegee aircrafts, so I was really interested in hearing his stories. He passed several years ago.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What was that like for him?

Melissa Miller-Monié: He actually talked about – it was a bit frustrating in the earlier years, but the rewarding part that he spoke about was having the opportunity to know some of the Tuskegee air men and to be there for them when they were able to come back from their journeys that they made.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: So what is a Tuskegee Air Man?

[0:04:00]

Melissa Miller-Monié: The [has trouble pronouncing “Tuskegee”] – now you got me saying it wrong –

[Laughter]

– Tuskegee air men were some of the first African American men who were part of the war, and the deeper history, I would have to

get Pastor Fred to help in the years and all of those things. But it was an honor for a lot of the African American men to actually be able to fly in the war with Caucasian men. And they had their own little unit, and they were very proud to be a part of the history in saving their country, because they were able to go out and fight just like the white soldiers were.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Describe any brothers and sisters you have.

Melissa Miller-Monié: I'm an only-child [laughter].

[0:05:00]

Keleigh Henry: Now let's talk a little bit about your experience growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Melissa Miller-Monié: I grew up in the Highland Heights community, where you guys are presently located. Growing up here in Highland Heights was the – an awesome experience. There were some places called Atlantic Properties, and those units are duplexes, and that was the first unit that my mom lived in for many years. And I remember when we would go and visit places, people were like, "Oh, I want to live in Highland Heights. What is it like?" It was really quiet. The school at Treadwell was really great. We had an opportunity to come home from school and play in a neighborhood. Kids would do their homework, then go outside; and we would have block parties, kickball, baseball games throughout the year.

[0:06:03]

And it seemed we were like family, so it was really wonderful growing up in Highland Heights. And years after that, my mom wanted to buy a house. And so she would drive around, and she actually found the house on Lenthier. One of the guys that lived there, he lived in Mississippi, and he wanted to go back to his roots. And so she found our house where she lives now, and the interesting part about that was the house that we moved in on Lenthier ended up right next-door to the building engineer at Treadwell.

His name was Mr. Street, and he was an Elder at the Coleman Avenue Church of Christ. And I remember one time at Treadwell Elementary – I think I was in first or – Kindergarten or first grade, and Mr. Street would always talk to me and everything, and this was before I ever knew that we were gonna move next-door to him. So that was really exciting for me, years later, to move next-door to him.

[0:07:09]

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What was it like to live next-door to somebody who worked at your school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: By the time that we moved over next-door to him, he had retired. But the thing about it, I think – at that time, I was in the sixth or seventh grade, and he had a granddaughter, and he would take us to school on those cold mornings. So that was interesting to me to be a little girl and having had the opportunity to meet him, and then years later, he's taking myself and his granddaughter to the school that I met him at.

Keleigh Henry: What was your home life like?

Melissa Miller-Monié: My home life was – it was nice. It was quiet. Since I was an only-child, I often played by myself until the summer. I had cousins that lived in Somerville.

[0:08:00]

They would always come down to visit with us. There were six of them: it was three boys and three girls, and I would always call them the Brady Bunch. So they loved coming down to Memphis, because they thought – the big city, different stores and restaurants – they enjoyed coming to Memphis.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Do you like being an only-child?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Sometimes I didn't feel like an only-child, because my mom always had her doors open to many of my cousins. So I really didn't feel like an only-child, because they were always around. When one would come and stay for several months and then leave, somebody else would come in, so it wasn't really like an only-child set up.

Keleigh Henry: What kind of activities were you involved in?

Melissa Miller-Monié: In school? Well, in school, I was involved in the band.

[0:09:00]

Earlier years, I was part of the Brownie troop. Also in school, I was a part of the Yearbook Club, Spanish Club – not Spanish – French Club – there were several activities at Treadwell that I was

involved in. I also was involved in the basketball team. I was a statistician for the boys' basketball team, and it was interesting, because me and another young lady was the first females to be a part of the boys' basketball statistician team, so that was interesting in the earlier years as well. In band, I played clarinet. Mr. Strong was the band teacher, and he would always give us very good techniques on how to hold our instrument, and the way to stand and hold your head up when you're walking, and things like that that carried on for us a long way.

[0:10:02]

Keleigh Henry: How did you feel being in all those clubs?

Melissa Miller-Monié: It kept me involved, and it kept me engaged, and it allowed me the opportunity to meet other people in the school. So I became a part of a unit of people who were doing positive things, and I always wanted to do good things in a neighborhood, to introduce people to the positive kids in school instead of being a part of something negative.

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

Melissa Miller-Monié: Treadwell had a strong PTA club, and when I was young, I didn't understand what PTA meant. I just know that those parents would always be up at the school anytime the band, or the football, or the basketball teams were doing things.

[0:11:04]

And so when I grew up, and I understand what it meant, and I had children myself, I understood that being involved with your children, you had to be involved in the school that they're a part of in order to make sure that their voices are heard in school. So I think seeing those people at an early age participate in PTA, that influenced me to be more involved in my children's life.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Transitioning: I'm going to ask you about your educational experience. Where did you go to elementary school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Treadwell Elementary.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: How was it like being at Treadwell Elementary?

[0:11:57]

Melissa Miller-Monié: It was interesting, because I think during that time when I was at Treadwell in the early '70s, it was a transitioning period because the integration of African Americans moving into the neighborhood. I was maybe one out of two or three blacks in the class, so sometimes it was a balancing act to be a part of a school. But overall, it turned out to be a good experience.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Did you participate in any activities?

Melissa Miller-Monié: In elementary, I participated in the Brownie troop.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What was that?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Brownies is similar to Girl Scouts. It's the level that you go in before becoming a Girl Scout, and there's one before that: I think it's Pansies or something, but I was a Brownie. I think my troop was 729.

[0:13:07]

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Did you ever participate in selling things, like Girl Scout cookies?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Girl Scout cookies? I do not – oh, you're talking about during that time? Yes, I did. I did.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Okay. Now I'm gonna ask you, what middle school did you go to?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Treadwell Middle School.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What activities did you participate in?

Melissa Miller-Monié: In middle school, I participated in band; I participated in the French club; I also participated in the basketball team, being a statistician; and that kind of kept me busy.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: How was it like participating in the basketball team?

Melissa Miller-Monié: It was a good experience to get into the games free –

[Laughter]

[0:13:59]

– and also, we had the opportunity to learn what scouts were, because Treadwell had an awesome basketball team for many, many years. People like Ray Maddow, Robby Hayes, and those guys, and later on Elliot Perry and Anthony Hardaway. So there were always great scouts coming to the school to see who Treadwell had coming through the lines in basketball.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: So statis – what was –

Melissa Miller-Monié: I'm sorry?

Keyonté Morris-Loper: – a statis –

Melissa Miller-Monié: Statistician? A statistician was a person that kept the records for the players. The statistician would have a sheet where the names of the players were down, and every time a player would shoot a shot, you would have to document that. If a player passed the ball, that would be called an assist.

[0:15:01]

If a person blocked the ball, we would have to document all of those things that were happening.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What high school did you go to?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Treadwell.

[Laughter]

Treadwell high school.

Keleigh Henry: Did you have any diversity in your schools?

Melissa Miller-Monié: I'm sorry?

Keleigh Henry: Did you have any diversity in your school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Yes. In the later years at Treadwell, a lot of the Korean students moved in, so we got an opportunity to learn some of their languages or just have interaction with them. So I think outside of the African Americans and the Caucasians, the diversity was the Korean students.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Did you ever have mixed friends in school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Yes.

[0:16:00]

Keyonté Morris-Loper: So what activities did you participate in high school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: The same ones: basketball, French Club – I later got involved with Home Economics. The lady that taught that class was Ms. **Chattler**. And Ms. Chattler, she wanted to make sure that we knew how to cook healthy foods, and she also taught us how to sew *[laughter]*. So Treadwell had a very diverse curriculum that kept the kids busy and also gave us tools to bring back home to **have** our parents as well. And we had something called the birdfeeder, and what that was – after we learned how to cook certain foods, the students would have the opportunity to come over to the birdfeeder and purchase their lunch, and it was like being at a restaurant off-campus.

[0:17:04]

They didn't have to eat it in the cafeteria. And so it also gave us the opportunity for students to taste our food.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Did you ever do biology in school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Biology, I didn't really like. The lady that taught biology, her name was Ms. **Cantrel**. A very wonderful teacher, but I wasn't into animals, and dissecting, and all that stuff *[laughter]*.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What did you do after you left high school?

Melissa Miller-Monié: After I left high school, I thought I wanted to join the Navy. One of my high school friends, we were gonna go in on a buddy system.

[0:17:58]

But after I learned that you had to be thrown into this huge pool, it kinda changed my mind, because I don't know how to swim, and I don't know why I thought about the Navy. So I ended up attending Shelby State College. I thought I wanted to go into computers, and that was good for a while. I got the basic classes out of the way, and somehow ended up thinking I wanted to be an attorney. So I found out about a program that **Crishenvellis** had. It was a paralegal class. And so I went into that field and ended up working for an attorney that practiced defense law. His name was

Matt Dickenson. He was one of the best criminal attorneys around, but watching the clients come in, it was really interesting.

[0:19:04]

Some of the cases that we would handle for him or for them, it kinda started my mind to spinning and thinking, “Is this what I really wanted to do with my life? Defend people who actually were accused of these cases?” Some of them actually were guilty, and some were not. And after being in his office for a while, I met a lady who was campaigning for Judge Joe Brown. At that time he was running for Judge, he was an attorney. And she’s like, “I would like to get you out of this office. I have some friends I want you to meet who has an attorney’s office, and you would be great.” It ended up being Wharton and Wharton. Mr. Wharton and his wife, Ruby Wharton, had an attorney’s firm, where they had several attorneys in that particular firm.

[0:20:00]

There was **Tarruk Sugarman**, **Dale Steiner**, and his wife, Ruby Wharton. They all practiced different types of law, and that allowed me an opportunity to experience real-estate law, criminal law, personal, and family law. So that’s what I ended up being involved in.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Did you **graduate** from **Christian Brothers**?

Melissa Miller-Monié: I completed the certification class through paralegal.

Keleigh Henry: Now we’re gonna talk about what role being religion played in your life growing up. Did you belong to a church growing up?

Melissa Miller-Monié: I do, yes. I attended the Church of Christ. I actually was baptized at a Church of Christ out in Somerville, but when I lived –

[0:21:01]

– over in Atlantic Properties, there was a church bus that would come around the neighborhood every Sunday and every Wednesday night. And my mom would allow me to go to the particular church after she got to know some of the people, and that church was Macon Road Church of Christ, which was – now it’s down on – what is that street – Macon Road, I believe – yeah. And so I think I was in second or third grade, and so I went there for many years. And after not missing a Wednesday night or a

Sunday, I remember they gave me my bible. And so that was a big honor for me to have accomplished something, and they gave me my own personal bible to read.

[0:21:56]

And during that time some years later, I went out to visit my grandparents out in Somerville, and there was a trailer that was set in the back of their house. And there were some people who said that they wanted to share the gospel, and ended up – there were some of the people from the Macon Road Church of Christ. And I was like – that was interesting to me to find out that these people had found people that were related to me. And so my grandmother ended up becoming a member of the Church of Christ, and so other family members ended up in that particular religion as well.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: How was it like being in the Church of Christ?

Melissa Miller-Monié: It has been really good. I've grown, switched churches on some occasions, but you have to always find your own relationship with Christ. And you have to study to show yourself approved, because in any denomination, you're gonna find some things that are not quite right.

[0:23:05]

But it's always important to make sure that you study for yourself and have your own true relationship with God, because some people will tell you, "Such and such is in the Bible." And it's not actually in there, but that's why you have to read and study for yourself.

Keleigh Henry: Can you tell me, who were your role models?

Melissa Miller-Monié: My mother is my role model, and my grandmother, and I also met some good people – Ms. Ruby Wharton was a good, strong lady, just as my mom was in my life; and those were my role models.

Keleigh Henry: Now we're gonna talk a little bit about your family. Could you tell me a little bit about your family at this point in your life? Are you married?

[0:24:06]

Melissa Miller-Monié: I am not married at this time. Unfortunately, I'm divorced. However, I have two children: I have a son and a daughter, Joshua and Jayla.

Keleigh Henry: Can you tell me about your children?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Yes. Joshua lives in Arkansas with his father. Josh also plays in a band; he plays saxophone. He likes to play basketball. Jayla lives with me. She is outgoing, loves people, loves animals, so she's just finding all the things that she loves to keep me busy [laughter].

[0:25:00]

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Okay. What kind of activities were you involved in during this period?

Melissa Miller-Monié: During this period, I'm involved in my outreach organization called SOLID, Scope of Life Illuminates Destiny. I got involved with SOLID back in 1993 before it had a name. In 1993, there was a young lady who was walking home from school in the Hickory Hill area, and she was caught in between gunfire, and she was shot and killed. And so the day of her funeral, one of her church members came over to my house – I was friends with him – and he basically talked about how sad it was to lose this young lady at 14 years old, who had been a model student, who had been very involved in her church.

[0:26:04]

And it was just really sad to hear her story, and we started talking about what could we do to impact the lives of other children so that they won't have to go through losing their lives. So we called about 20 people that we knew and invited them to a meeting the following week. They all showed up. From there, we created what we call SOLID, Scope of Life Illuminates Destiny. And some of the first things that we did was to have seminars to talk to parents and let parents know some of the things that kids were dealing with at school – the bullying, the peer pressure – because, I think what happened from the age of the '60s to '70s –

[0:27:00]

– parents wanted to work to have nice, materialistic things, and they wanted their kids to have those things. However, the disconnect started where parents were not oftentimes talking to

their children, and it wasn't anything intentional, but it just happened. So when we started doing these seminars, we saw those barriers between the parents and the children. And so those seminars allowed those parents to start to reconnect, and start talking, and listening to their children.

And so through the parenting seminars, we ended up going on to prisons in west Tennessee to talk to those guys who were in prison to find out what led them to prison. And then years later we ended up doing fun safety summer camps at Treadwell, where kids were wanting somewhere to come to have a safe place, and so we called them fun safety summer camps.

[0:28:02]

The camps were free. We often had people come in from the community to do rap sessions and just do real talk with the guys. And today we still do SOLID, but we've shifted our focus to work with older people, because we have so many people in our community who are working with youth. I'm not saying we're not working with youth, but our older adults connect with the younger generation by sharing stories. And when we do clean up projects, we try to involved the youth in those activities as well. So that's kinda how SOLID got started.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Were you involved in your neighborhood?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Yes.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: What was it like being involved in your neighborhood?

[0:29:00]

Melissa Miller-Monié: Being involved in your neighborhood allows you to see the needs of the neighborhood. It also allows you to connect people who have similar interests, and allow them to get together and have conversations; because if they're doing gardens, or needing activities for their children, or needing activities for their adults, we can connect them together by being involved in a neighborhood.

Keleigh Henry: What kind of entertainment do you enjoy?

Melissa Miller-Monié: Peace and quiet [laughter]. I like movies, walking, and basically just doing things with my children.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Are you involved in your church?

[0:30:01]

Melissa Miller-Monié: Yes, I'm involved with my church. We do **motley** activities, and right now, the children are preparing for what you call a Bible Bowl. And so weekly – several times a week, the kids are practicing with their Bible Bowl, and the parents are encouraging the kids to study, and we do fun activities and games to ensure that they're learning all that they can.

Keleigh Henry: As a wrap-up question, what advice would you give young people these days?

Melissa Miller-Monié: To do what you're doing now, starting young; to explore different avenues; and to talk to as many people as you can who are in your community, because there are so many things out here that you can possibly get into, and you don't have to box yourself in.

[0:31:01]

And you set your own tone, because it's a new generation, but you learn from other people. You learn what was positive for them, or you learn what didn't work for them so that you can be creative and have a voice. **Although** we had Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, and all of those people, but you can't keep living through their eyes, because that was back then. Now you have the power to vote, but what are you gonna vote for if you don't get out and get involved in things like you're doing now. And you have to find out what you guys want for your generation and moving forward.

Keyonté Morris-Loper: Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom project.

Melissa Miller-Monié: Thank you for having me.

[End of Audio]