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*Cedrick:* Today is June 16<sup>th</sup>. On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and Team for Success, we'd like to thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. I am Cedrick Kimble. I will be your interviewer and also we are honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived only at the Crossroads to Freedom website. If you can, please state some basic information about yourself starting with your name, please.

*Will Ann:* My name is Will Ann Avery.

*Cedrick:* And if you don't mind, could you please tell us where you were born?

*Will Ann:* I was born in Ridgley, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1937, and I lived in Ridgley for a little while. Then I moved to Windberg with my grandparents –

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and I stayed there for about six or seven years and then I moved to Henning, Tennessee with my father and stepmother, and I stayed there until I was in eighth grade, and I graduated from the eighth grade at Palmer Turner School in Henning, after which I went to a private high school in North Carolina, Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina. I graduated from high school in 1955. I entered Tennessee State University and I graduated from Tennessee State in 1959.

*Cedrick:* Okay.

*Will Ann:* Is that enough? *[Laughs]* Too much?

*Cedrick:* You know I heard you say you at a point in time was in North Carolina, and you know being there you was raised –

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in Ridgley and growing up in that environment, so when you moved to North Carolina, how did that affect you? Did it seem like a rush? Was it something that you kinda got used to or did it take time to -

*Will Ann:* I got used to it pretty much all at once. It was back then in the olden days it was kind of a status symbol to go to a private high

school, and my father wanted to keep up with the Joneses, so he sent me to North Carolina to a private high school. We stayed on the dormitory and I got used to it. I liked it. I only got to come home twice a year, Christmas and the end of school, but we did what we had to do.

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And I stayed there four years and graduated.

*Cedrick:* That's good. Do you have any siblings?

*Will Ann:* I had one brother. He lived in Florida. He died in 2004 and that was the only one.

*Cedrick:* Oh, so were you -

*Will Ann:* It was just two of us.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Were you the oldest?

*Will Ann:* I was the oldest.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Now I want to ask you about your educational experience. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you did attend Lincoln High School, right?

*Will Ann:* No I never attended Lincoln. I taught at Lincoln when I came to Lake County.

*Cedrick:* Okay, and how many years did you teach?

*Will Ann:* I stayed at Lincoln for six years and then I was moved to Lara Kendall at Ridgely.

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At that time it was Lake County Junior High and I taught there for two years, and after two years I moved to Lake County High School where I finished my teaching career.

*Cedrick:* Okay, so basically you're saying you weren't around when it was like Lincoln School had an all-black school?

*Will Ann:* It was all black when I first went there to teach.

*Cedrick:* Okay.

*Will Ann:* In my whole time there it was all black.

*Cedrick:* Okay, so around the time segregation started, how did it affect your educational experience?

*Will Ann:* It didn't really affect my educational experience that much. I was in Nashville at Tennessee State during the time of the sit-ins and demonstrations –

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and whatever, but I did not really participate in anything that was going on off-campus. The highlight I guess of my stay at Tennessee State as far as race was concerned was I got to see Dr. Martin Luther King. He spoke for us at a religious emphasis week, and the one thing that I really remember about what he said was it's no longer a survival, it's a survival of the slickest and not all the time the survival of the fittest. So I remember that, what he said.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Since we're kind of talking about back in the day, how do –

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or how did students react to each other?

*Will Ann:* It was a little bit difficult. Maybe "difficult" is not a good word, but some of the students were accepting; some were a little on the other side and really didn't want to be accepting especially of me as a teacher. It was fine for me as just a person to talk to but not in the classroom as a teacher, and then I had some students who were very cooperative, helpful, and encouraging, and I had white students at Ridgley. When I went there I taught eighth grade.

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I had white students in Tiptonville when I came to Lake County High School, so all of the experiences at the time that I left Lincoln, it was all black, so I had no white students at Lincoln.

*Cedrick:* So when you started teaching at Lake County High School, was it already integrated?

*Will Ann:* It was already integrated.

*Cedrick:* And as far as the atmosphere, was there really like an issue? I know you said you had African American people talking to you and even some white people. I don't know if the ones that didn't want to accept it came around, but the ones that did finally just decide what else can we do about it now, they kind of came around.

*Will Ann:* Right. That's true.

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We still have them, but we did have some like that.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Well I'm gonna switch lanes a little bit and talk about churches. So can you describe the church that you attended as a child?

*Will Ann:* Okay, as a child when I lived in Henning I attended St. Mark Baptist Church there. When I came to Lake County to live, when I was in Chattanooga my first job was in Chattanooga, but when I came to Lake County I attended Mt. Zion Freewill Baptist Church because that's where my grandmother was going and I attended church with her, and then I just was kind of a community thing. Back then the churches didn't have church every Sunday, so it was odd Sundays.

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One church would have first and third, another church would have second and fourth, so on the Sundays that I did not go with my grandmother we would go to other churches in the county. So I just kind of became a community person and I attend all of 'em.

*Cedrick:* Okay, and at that time was it segregated?

*Will Ann:* The churches?

*Cedrick:* Yes, ma'am.

*Will Ann:* Well they're still like they are now.

*Cedrick:* Okay, and what did the church community mean to you?

*Will Ann:* The church community was important to me in that I felt like or I thought that maybe I could be an example or role model or help,

and so I attended all of the churches and I didn't make any difference in where I went.

*Cedrick:* So you were like a helping hand?

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Like if they needed you for something, you was there.

*Will Ann:* I was there.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Who would you say growing up were your role models?

*Will Ann:* Oh my goodness. Growing up? It's been a long time, Cedrick. [Laughs] When I was in high school my favorite teacher was a lady named Esther Alexander, and I finally lost touch with her after I graduated from high school. In college I had several, a lady named Vester Wheaton was a big help to me. Also a lady, a Mrs. Forbes was very helpful.

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And then I had some who were friends of my father's because he went to Tennessee State also, and some of them were friends of his and they became friends of mine too.

*Cedrick:* Okay, so do you think they influenced the path that you took?

*Will Ann:* That's kind of hard to say. Kinda sorta; I would say maybe they did in some ways. Because back then you know we didn't go into a lot of fields. You either went into education and you taught school, you could be a nurse, or you could be maybe a social worker. So we just didn't venture out at that time -

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to go into a lot of fields. So I stuck with the comfortable ones I guess, which was education and social work.

*Cedrick:* One thing I would really like to know is what was so special about the people that you named? Was there advice that they gave to you or encouraging words that they gave to you or were they just people that you could just go to in a bad time, a good time, just someone to talk to?

*Will Ann:* Kind of. More or less they were just kind of like a comfort zone. You could go and you could talk to 'em and they'd encourage you, give you advice if you needed it, help if you needed it, both verbal and maybe –

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financial too if you really needed something.

*Cedrick:* Okay. I'm gonna backtrack just a little bit. You said you went to school in this area until the eighth grade, so how would you describe your years in school here?

*Will Ann:* Okay, until the eighth grade I was in Henning at Palmer Turner and my father was principal of the school, so I couldn't do too much getting in trouble. I was a good kid because I had somebody watching me all the time, so I didn't really have time to get in trouble and all that, but I had friends and I enjoyed myself.

*Cedrick:* Okay, and could you also describe how it was like living in this area during segregation?

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*Will Ann:* Well that's kind of hard to say. It's kind of not a lot different, but it is different in the sense of now we can go places that we couldn't go then, but I lived in the country with my grandparents, so there was really – when I was growing up there was really no place to go, so you didn't have to worry about going out to eat, going to the movie, and different things like that. You went to the movie, you went upstairs usually. It was segregated, but I guess in a sense there was some things that you just didn't think anything about. It was just a normal way of life because that was all we knew at that time.

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*Cedrick:* I know you kind of touched on the students taking you in as a teacher there, so now I would like to know how would you express how the other staff members felt or their actions?

*Will Ann:* When I went to Ridgley School I was pretty well accepted by the faculty. At least if I was not, I guess they didn't let me know it. [Laughs] They were helpful, some of them, and some of them were encouraging. I had several that would come to my rescue if I needed it.

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*Cedrick:* Okay, so looking over your life from early childhood up to this moment, how would you say Lake County has changed, or has it not changed?

*Will Ann:* It has changed in some ways, but maybe it's changed mostly because we have changed, and maybe we have changed more than the county has changed, but it has changed in the sense of we're still as far as going places and doing things, you can practically do anything that you have the finances if it takes money, you have finance to do it, you can just about do it. You can go anywhere to eat. We don't have movie theaters, so you don't have to worry about that. The closest movie is –

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Dyersburg and you just go to the movie. So in a sense it has changed, but also in a sense there's not as many places to go because we don't have a lot of businesses and entertainment and that kind of thing.

*Cedrick:* Since we're on the subject of change, is there anything that you would like to see change in Lake County?

*Will Ann:* I would like to see the students be aggressive and alert to things that are around them and concentrate on progress.

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Maybe growing up, learning things, learning to be with people and realizing that all people are really not the same but to learn to get to know people who for they really are and to treat people as you want to be treated, not to always be looking for a scapegoat or be looking for something to get into and not have to always wanna be with the crowd. Don't be afraid of making good grades. If you make good grades, so be it, but we have so many students that I see since I have retired that I see that just don't seem to have any ambition or any aggressiveness at all.

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They're just satisfied where they are, and I'd like to see them be more aggressive.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Jumping back to segregation, would you say segregation still exists now more in rural than urban areas?

*Will Ann:* Depending on where and what situation I think it still exists. I can't say about urban areas because I'm not really – I just go to the city every once in a while and when I go I just go to visit somebody. I'm not out in the communities as such, but in rural areas I think it still exists because –

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I think we still have people that really wish that we were kind of still separated, so I think it does exist.

*Cedrick:* Okay. As an organization, Crossroads to Freedom focuses on assets based community development, meaning that we focus on the institutions, ideas, and organization that bring value to the community. In your opinion, what are some of the greatest assets in Lake County?

*Will Ann:* One of the greatest assets is the opportunities that are there for students to accept and for people to accept if they really desire to. I think our schools are maybe a little bit in turmoil –

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right now, but I think our schools are very – we have a good school system all-in-all. A lot of things may be going on now that are not too good, but I think overall we have a good system. I think our educational system is one of the great assets.

*Cedrick:* Seeing that you grew up here then returned, are there certain things that brought you back or is it just your love for the area?

*Will Ann:* Well at the time that I came back it was my grandparents that brought me back because my grandfather was a little ill at the time, and I came back to help with his care. After I got here I just stayed.

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So I guess now I can say that it's a love for the area, or I can't afford to go anywhere else. *[Laughs]*

*Cedrick:* Okay. If you could describe Lake County in one word, what would it be and why?



*Will Ann:* One word? I can't describe Lake County in one word. I would say it is growing, and I would say that because I'm hoping that the generations that are coming on and the young people that are coming after us are more aggressive and want more for themselves

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and that maybe in some way they can look at role models or maybe in some way we have been kind of role models that have encouraged them to realize that they want to move up and that they wanna come back to Lake County, and hopefully someday they will because right now everybody just wants to get away and hopefully we can have industries and things to come in and that will want to draw, that will draw people back and that will make them want to come back to Lake County.

*Cedrick:* Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we did not talk about today?

*Will Ann:* Not that I can think of. If you think of something else I'll -

*Cedrick:* Well I personally —

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well it's really not a personal question, but I would like to know how do you think youth could get more involved today?

*Will Ann:* In all areas?

*Cedrick:* All areas such as church. I know you spoke on school-wise, but church-wise and in the community.

*Will Ann:* Being visible in the community, participating in activities that come up and various things that — I don't know whether I'd call it silly or not, but when I look at Lake County High School yearbook or when I look at a church activity or when I look at any activity I always look at it in the sense of seeing if there are any black students there.

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When I look at the Honor Society I wanna know if there are black students in the Honor Society. What clubs are you in and what

things do you do and how do you participate in various things? So I like to see you get involved in clubs, activities, and things that are going good, clean fun things.

*Cedrick:* Okay. We wanna thank you for your participation in the Crossroads to Freedom project and we enjoyed learning more about your story today. I personally wanna thank you for your time being here and thank you.

*Will Ann:* You're welcome. Okay. If there's anything I can do, I'll be glad to do it.

*[End of Audio]*