

Mikia Crump: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and Knowledge Quest, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Mikia Crump.

Malishia Smith: And I'm Malishia Smith.

Mikia Crump: And we are honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record? What is your name?

William Downy: William Downy.

Mikia Crump: When and what year were you born?

William Downy: I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, Shelby County, 1952. August 15th.

Mikia Crump: Where were you raised?

William Downy: LeMoyne Gardens mostly, and the **Stevens Block** subdivision. After I left the projects, we moved right across the top of the hill, and that's where I've been most of my life.

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I live there now.

Mikia Crump: What is your occupation?

William Downy: Retired. Had a heart attack, but I'm a heavy equipment operator by trade. I operate bulldozers, and track hoes, and construction equipment.

Mikia Crump: Who are your parents?

William Downy: Leona Downy, deceased; and Ernest Downy, deceased also.

Mikia Crump: May you describe what were they like when they were alive?

William Downy: We – well, I come from a big family, and my mom was a housekeeper, you know, stayed home. My dad worked every day. Didn't get to talk to him much. Maybe on the weekend when you work from – dark when he left, and dark when he came home. So, you just – you get to know your mother, but the father kinda distant like that from working.

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Mikia Crump: If you had any brothers and sisters, could you describe them?

William Downy: I had seven sisters and four brothers. Now, we – family. We did just like every other family. We fought, we played, we laughed, we cooked, and we did just about everything a family could do. We worked together, played sports together, but we was okay. We didn't have much, but we didn't know that then. We were just there, trying to make a difference, growing to be something respectable, because you had to respect your family and you didn't want to go out and disrespect them because – the bad news was gonna beat you home, and it's gonna be trouble. You always had to be respectful.

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Mikia Crump: Are you, or were you married?

William Downy: I am married to my childhood sweetheart – 43 years we're been together. Since 1968. We are still making each other laugh. We're happy together. That tickled me when I thought about it.

Mikia Crump: What's your spouse's name?

William Downy: Excuse me?

Mikia Crump: What's your spouse's name and occupation?

William Downy: My wife's name is **Geraldine Seward** Downy. Her occupation is freelance. She caters. She do landscaping. She like to do flowers – I'd say she's a horticulturalist. She likes working in the yard, and she do that for other people. We've got customers that call. I'd say we've got a landscaping business, and it's kinda – runs in her family.

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But I used to do it also.

Mikia Crump: Do you, or did you have any kids?

William Downy: Yes. One. Tasha – biological kids, but I had about 50, but you know. Kids from my neighborhood, from my church, from all around, but I've got one daughter. Her name is Tasha Downy.

She was – she got married once, and divorced. She got a bachelor’s degree at Clark, Atlanta University. She got a master’s degree at the University of Michigan, and a law degree at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

Mikia Crump: Right. Now we’re gonna talk a little about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

William Downy: Well, like I said, I grew up in the Stevens Block subdivision.

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Mostly – I was born in the **Morton Gardens**, but I moved out when I was maybe in fifth grade, and we moved just over the hill to my grandmother’s house. She moved further. My daddy had taken sick, and so we had to move out. We moved into that house, and it was like being born again. The projects was just – it wasn’t much moving around. You didn’t move around much because you lived on one street, and the other people from this street, and from that street. So, it was like being born again when we got out of the projects. They called it the asphalt jungle down in here, you know? But now, it’s College Park. It was Morton Gardens.

Mikia Crump: What was your home life like?

William Downy: I think it was good. It was a lot of us, and we had – just like any other family, I guess.

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We had our ups and downs, but I think we were mostly happy because we didn’t have much, but it didn’t really matter because nobody had much. So, we were okay. There was a lot of us. So it was always something to do. I was a meddler. I’d meddle some, and they’d meddle me, and beat me up, and – you know how girls do, right? I had seven sisters, like I said. So I had to be good.

Mikia Crump: What kinds of activities were you involved in?

William Downy: I was a baseball player from way back. I liked to skate, and I played football. I played all sports, but baseball was my favorite. I played – when the Boys’ Club was originated in this area, 1963.

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You could pay a dollar to join the Boys' Club, or you could work for five hours, I think, and then you get in. So, I worked my way in, you know, for the five hours.

Mikia Crump: Since you played baseball in your younger days, do you still play now, or are you coaching?

William Downy: I love baseball. I'm glad you asked me that. I'm coaching some, you know. I've got some guys kinda hardheaded, but you know, I guess that's what make coaching so fun is just – but what I'm doing, I try not to be so much as a coach as just a – to inspire – to teach sportsmanship. That's my main line. It's not so much of winning, it's just the enjoyment of the game that I love, and try to pass it on.

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For them to enjoy it, and play good, play well, do the best you can. All you have to do is say you want to play, and you can play for me.

Mikia Crump: Can you share some of your memories from your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

William Downy: Well, there's a lot of them. I'm kinda old, you know, so I've got a lot of experiences – well, mostly inspired by people that worked and people that wanted to do better, and we always said that we was gonna do the right thing so that we could take our place in society when it came to be. So, you know, we just tried to be good. The pastor was always an inspiration. The teachers inspired us. Family, mostly. You see, my sister's coming out. A couple of them went to (muffled), and went on to nursing schools, and that was an inspiration for me to try to do something – try to do better, and get out.

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Mikia Crump: Now I'm gonna ask you some questions about your educational experiences. Where did you go to elementary school?

William Downy: I went to elementary school at Porter Junior High, but when I went there, 1956, I think, Porter School was from the first to the eighth grade, and then you went to Booker T. Washington. But, I went to Porter School in the first and second grade, so they built Georgia Avenue Elementary. So I switched there in the third grade, and when I moved over the hill to the Stevens Block subdivision, I

went to Walker School in the sixth grade because the new guys that I had met, and we had a baseball team, and so I went there in the sixth grade.

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And then, I went back to Porter in the seventh grade – seventh, eighth, and ninth. And then in tenth grade, I went back to Booker T. Washington.

Mikia Crump: What did you do after leaving high school?

William Downy: Well, when I finished, I went into the Navy just like most of the people did. You either had – scholarships weren't just available like they are now. You see, you had to be really smart, or really got money to go off to college or something like that. So I went to the Navy. Then I learned – I was in the weapons department. I went to Vietnam, and just like everybody else, and came home, and opportunities weren't available, you know, just like we thought it was gonna be.

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So we went into the workforce doing different things. I first started working for a paper company cutting paper, making tablets, and made pretty good doing that. Then I started operating heavy equipment, and I did that for about 30 years.

Mikia Crump: How did integration and segregation impact your educational experiences?

William Downy: Well, it didn't. Integration was something that came about slowly, and we went to an all-black school. We had no whites at our schools during that time. So, it might be strange to say, but we kinda – I don't know if you call it prejudice or what, but we kinda – we didn't want to be integrated. We wanted to stay segregated and do what we do, and we had a dream that one day, we was gonna be somebody.

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We wanted to be respectable, so just in case, one day if I lived next door to a white person, then we're the same. Equality is what we looked for.

Mikia Crump: We're going to talk about your religion. What role did religion play in your life growing up?

William Downy: It played a very, very, very important role, you see, 'cause we've got so many black men that's been in prison since teenage years, you see. So, we are – right from wrong came into play. It come into play now, every day. You learn this in church, and also it spilled off into home. Now they have bible study at the churches. You go to bible study. But we had it at home.

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We would study the bible, and we would go over things that we should do and what we shouldn't do. I think that that played just right from wrong, you know? It played a bigger role in my life because I chose not to go the route of being a whatever, just out in the streets, wild, crazy, and just chose to be low-key and try to make it through, praying a lot. I always prayed. That wasn't a good thing to say on the corner, with your friends. So, I think that was important – prayer, it works. Believe me.

Mikia Crump: Did you belong to a church growing up? If so, which one?

William Downy: Yes, I belonged to Monumental Baptist Church, and that Operation PUSH came through there, and that's the organization with Jesse Jackson – the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King, and Dr. Ralph Abernathy, and all of them.

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This was our organization. That's – through my church, Monumental – Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles who was on the balcony at the Lorraine Motel when Martin Luther King got shot. So, that was my minister. That was our pastor. He came out of Chicago – the pastor of our church.

Mikia Crump: What did the church mean to the community?

William Downy: Everything that went on in the community came through the church. If you had a meeting – if we had a protest, a march, a whatever, the church was the place. It was against the law to illegally assemble. You couldn't do like a gang of 50 kids – 50 people get together and congregate.

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You know, whatever you're talking about or whatever you're trying to do, it was illegal. Unlawful assembly, I think they called it. So, everything we did, we did it at the church. If we had a meeting, we had it at the church – picnics, always church. So it was a big impact on the community, and everybody belonged to some church. It just wasn't – just out there. You went to school where you got learning. You had home and you got learning, and at church. So, we held church to the highest – that was it. We were Southern Baptists, and proud to be.

Malishia Smith: Let's talk a little about the period from about the 1950s and 1970s. Are there any stories in particular from this period that you would like to share with us, like the sanitation strike?

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William Downy: That was most of my life, from the '50s to the '70s. I was a kid in the '50s, and the '70s, I thought I was a man. But Martin Luther King did the sanitation strike – now, even before then, like I said, we couldn't protest. We marched for equality, and for just – what was another person's birthright, we had to ask for it, and we had to protest for it. We had to march. Just like the Voter's Rights Act. I think it was 1965 or something like that. We had to march, and protest for this, and take beatings and whatever the people decided to give to try to deter us from being able to vote. And then, with the sanitation strike that came later, 1968 –

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– Martin Luther King was in Chicago marching for the housing and stuff that was up there, and he thought we had a bigger problem here. But they told him, you know, that if you come here, what was gonna happen. But, if you were religious, you believed in God, and you put it in his hands.

Malishia Smith: Okay. What was it like living in South Memphis?

William Downy: Well, South Memphis was a beautiful place. Now, you see a lot of empty lots and you see a lot of houses gone, but it was a house – every lot you see, if you can imagine there was a house there. We had a movie theater just to right there on Mississippi and Walker, and we call this Berry Hill. It was the Berry Hill where – not the subdivision, but this is what we called it.

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We had drugstores on Mississippi and Walker just right up the street. We had little places where the Four Way Grill – you know that – is there – still there. It's under different management. Ms. Cleaves, when I was a kid. She ran that Four Way Grill. You know we had a burger bar up there. Well, mostly we had our own stuff, like I said, it was segregated. We had our own movie theater. We had one on Georgia, and then downtown, Main Street, where we didn't go. We stayed right here.

Malishia Smith: Okay, thank you. Were there some more values you in your life and instill in your children during these times?

William Downy: Yes. Very much so. They just – morals, and also values. This was a thing that was taught from my dad, my uncles – everybody.

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To do what's right. Take care of your family. You see? And, hey, just be upstanding citizen as you can, and just do what a man do. Take care – now we don't have as much as men stand with the family as it was then. This was a must. If you bring a kid in the world, your responsibility is to take care of this kid, and you did it. But, we kinda lost that in the struggle, as things happen, you know. Things get misplaced, and we do other things. So, a lot of our values got kinda wiped out.

Malishia Smith: Okay. What kinds of entertainment did you enjoy? Like, the zoo, movie theaters, music, Beale Street –

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William Downy: Hey. Beale Street back then was a place that the musicians went. It wasn't like it is now. If you came to Memphis to do a show or something, then at the end of the day, you ended up on Beale Street, and they had just like everywhere else, they had evening – they had beer drinking cafes, holes in the walls. Whatever they call it. And everybody went there. So, but we mostly had house parties. Not really parties, just dances, so that we didn't go too far doing much. It wasn't no clubs underage. So, if your parents would like you have a dance, you had a dance. We didn't have no – we just danced. Wasn't no food, no barbecue or nothing going on.

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‘Cause we didn’t have it, but we enjoyed dancing and playing sports.

Malishia Smith: Did you have a job during this period of time?

William Downy: You know, when I was a kid, they had a neighborhood youth corps, and you worked – you filled out your application through the school year, and you worked in the summer. I know it might not seem like it was much now, but I think every two weeks, I think my check might’ve been \$110.00 or \$115.00 dollars, and wow, that was a lot. We – so that’s what we all – we were prepared to work. I learned how to work at an early age, even back earlier to the fields. Cotton was a big crop. Soy beans. So, we went and we chopped cotton.

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\$3.00 a day, and we picked cotton, whatever you could pick. Everybody wanted to try to pick 100 pounds, tear your fingertips up. But we all – we wanted to make an honest living, and this is the way that we did it.

Malishia Smith: How did you feel when you heard that Martin Luther King had got assassinated?

William Downy: I’ll tell you, we was getting ready to have the march. I had been to the mountain speech the night before. I was late getting up that morning. 16 years old, and – I was walking, walking down to the hotel. The Lorraine – you see, ‘cause that was our hotel. When I got there, they was pointing over there. Like, maybe, hey, it was my dad.

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It hurt real bad. Still do, you know? ‘Cause we was on our way, you know? Wow, they cut us off.

Malishia Smith: Mm-hmm.

William Downy: We thought, anyway –

Malishia Smith: Is there any advice that you would want younger Memphians to know? If so, what would you tell them?

William Downy: I’d tell them to get educated. Educate yourself. Be true to what you believe in, and that’s what I always thought, that if I couldn’t

do for what I believe, I knew I had the capacity to die for that. But now, get educated. It's wide open. You can do whatever. It was places that we weren't accepted in. I don't know why it's hard to figure, but it's just the way it was.

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We wasn't angry. We had some militant groups, but we didn't go that route. We were non-violence, because we knew that if it wasn't non-violence, we was gonna be non-existents, and we probably would've been wiped out – a whole race. So, we just took the non-violent route, took whatever we can, and I think it was okay. We did okay.

Malishia Smith: Okay. If you could go back in time, what advice would you give yourself?

William Downy: Myself? You know, a lot of people said they would do things different. I'm pretty happy now. I did everything I could, I guess. I didn't get killed, didn't go to the penitentiary like most of my brothers – you know, dead, and in jail. I don't know. More education, I guess, or maybe.

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Well, I didn't want to leave the South 'cause I guess this was where my heart was. I went a lot of places while I was in the military, but this is home. So I don't think I'd make many changes, just maybe a little more education, or maybe try something different. I always liked working outside, so I was pretty happy with that. I got a pretty nice family. I've got a nice wife, and her family loves me too, and my family love her. You might know some of them.

Malishia Smith: When you speak about education, if you could, would you give that to the young kids _____ that –

William Downy: Yes, yes. For sure. Education is wisdom, you see?

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And exposure through education. You've got to be exposed to things, you know. Most of our kids, they've got no idea. They can't fathom what's going on in the rest of the world. So, you've gotta read books, you know? You've gotta do things that kinda open you up to what's really going on, 'cause in this area, in this

neighborhood, I know people that are maybe five or six years, and they haven't been out of a two block radius. It's as far as they go. It's sad, but that's just the way it is.

Malishia Smith: Is there anything you would like to cover that we haven't asked you?

William Downy: Seems like you all done asked me pretty much. Nope, uh-huh. I'm glad to do this interview. I could talk for longer, but I think we got it. We covered the things that I care about, which is my kids and my people and – hey, I'm happy.

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A lot of people, you know, got more money than me. They live better than I do. They think they do. But I always thought it's not where you live, it's how you live. So I'm doing pretty good. I'm okay – if I can get these boys to act right.

Malishia Smith: Well, we thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

William Downy: No, thank you, and I'd like to do it again sometime.

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