

Stevion Young: On behalf of Cross Roads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and Knowledge Quiz I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us. I'm Stevion Young. And this is --

Obediah Robinson: My name Obediah Robinson.

Stevion Young: And I'm honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Cross Roads to Freedom website. Today's date is June 25th, 2014.

Can you say some basic biographical information for the record? What's your name?

Frankie McNeil: Frankie McNeil.

Stevion Young: If you don't mind me asking what year were you born?

Frankie McNeil: Oh, I don't. August 8th, '34.

Stevion Young: Where were you born and raised?

Frankie McNeil: I was born in Memphis, Tennessee on Driver and Wicks just around the corner from this school.

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Stevion Young: What is your occupation?

Frankie McNeil: I'm retired.

Stevion Young: Did you marry?

Frankie McNeil: Yes, I did.

Stevion Young: What was your spouse's name and occupation if you will?

Frankie McNeil: His name was Ruby McNeil, Junior. He was a professional truck driver.

Stevion Young: Did you have any children and what are their names?

Frankie McNeil: No, I didn't.

Stevion Young: Now let's talk a little bit about your experiences growing up? Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Frankie McNeil: I grew up in south Memphis on Wicks and Driver, where I went to school at **LaRose**. After we call it _____. And then we would go down to the New LaRose, which is still existing. And I went to Booker Washington High School. I also went to Lang College.

And there's a lot of things I could tell you about it.

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I could give you some of my work experience if you'd like to know about it.

Stevion Young: Yes, we would.

Frankie McNeil: I worked 40 years in the corporate world. I was a professional salesperson. I exceeded quite a few of the people that worked with me. Every day I was lane number one, because I strived to be number one. Not only on my job, but everywhere I go, I want to be number one. I am a member of the Greater Watch Missionary Baptist Church. I am in the leadership of Roger R. Brown. I may stop just a little, because I have been under five pastors. Actually I've been in that church all of my life.

So you can figure out how many years that is. And also I would like to say a few things about the neighborhood. In that neighborhood I had a uncle named Johnny Williams.

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If he was living today he would probably be called a black millionaire, because he strived in that neighborhood to have grocery business and all types of homes that he secured. He bought them. He rented them out and he sold them. And in that day that was quite an accomplishment.

Stevion Young: What was your home life like?

Frankie McNeil: My home life was great. I had my mother was named Bernice Winston Taylor. My dad was named Oliver Gage, Junior. My home life was very good. I experienced quite a bit under the leadership of my mother and my grandmother. My dad is sometimes -- you know parents don't stay together. But we would talk too, read the bible and go to church.

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We went to church, Sunday School, 11:00 worship, bible study in the evening and 8:00 for night service. Oh, by the way I didn't tell you I am a member of the Greater Watch Music Ministry. And I'm also in the deacon ministry. I have been in that choir ever since I was nine years old I've been singing. And I sang my last song -- my last song, but I did do a solo just here last Saturday. One of my fine deacons that passed away from Earl Washington, which he had been a member there for 40 years.

Stevion Young: Who were your parents and what were they like?

Frankie McNeil: My parents were Bernice Winston Taylor. And Oliver Gage, Junior. And they were just good parents. Actually my daddy was just a real good daddy.

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He kind of spoiled me. I kind of got everything that I wanted out of him when I couldn't get it out of my mother. But I had very good parents.

Stevion Young: What schools did you attend? What was school like for you?

Frankie McNeil: Well, I loved school. I really did especially in high school, because we had real good teachers. I was in the -- quite a few teachers that made us really relate us. We could not go to school without shoes. ____ I don't know what you all call it out there. Brown and white and our **streams** had to be white. We could not go to school wearing pants like I have on today. We had to look like ladies. We had two teachers there, Mrs. Campbell, and Mrs. West I believe that was her name. But you had to come to school looking like a lady.

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Stevion Young: Can you share some memories of your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

Frankie McNeil: Well, one thing of my childhood I was one of the ones that had to keep house. And do all of the ironing. And at that time we ironed on a charcoal bucket with a smoothing iron. I know you don't know what that is. But that smoothing iron if you picked it up without having a cloth over it, you would burn your hand. We made our own scotch. We ironed our clothes. Actually I ironed clothes for everybody in the family, because I could really, really iron. And as of today, you may laugh at it, I won't iron.

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I do not like to iron. Actually I won't iron. I don't own an iron or an ironing board. I either hang my clothes up neatly, I throw them in the drier on the cycle that says iron.

Obdeiah Robinson: Okay, let's talk about -- okay let's talk about life in south Memphis used to be. What does south Memphis mean to you?

Frankie McNeil: South Memphis means everything to me, because that's where I got my start in south Memphis.

Obediah Robinson: What was going on in south Memphis in the '60's and '70's?

Frankie McNeil: In the '60's and '70's? In '67 I can't hardly recollect what was going on in the '60's and '70's.

[0:08:03]

Because I didn't live in south Memphis in the '60's and '70's. I lived in ____ ____.

Obediah Robinson: What was it like?

Frankie McNeil: Very good. I lived there. I reside there now. I moved out there. I was married in 1957. And I moved in that house in 1958, six months after I was married to Rubin McNeil, Junior. And we've been in that house over -- I've been in that house for 50 years, because he passed away in 2008. So it's been great. I wish you could come by there sometime and see. He was a professional gardener and I think I have one of the prettiest yards in Memphis. You don't get awards for the Memphis City Beautiful if you don't have a pretty yard.

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And he received awards for two years consecutive. And right now that yard looks just like it did the day that he died which was in 2008. I don't keep it up, but I have a very good person that keeps my yard up. And it is beautiful.

Obediah Robinson: How is south Memphis different now and then when you were ____ ____?

Frankie McNeil: Oh, my word. South Memphis is not near what it was when I was growing up, because I couldn't do the things that young people do now. I had to do what my momma said to. And at 12:00 I was in the house. We had a curfew. We couldn't roam up and down the street and ride cars and killing each other. As far as the gun we didn't have guns, because nobody feared nobody, because everybody tried to treat everybody right.

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We did what the bible said do unto others you have them do unto you. And that is the key to life.

Obediah Robinson: What was your ____ like in south Memphis?

Frankie McNeil: In south Memphis?

Obediah Robinson: Yeah.

Frankie McNeil: My neighbors?

Obediah Robinson: Yes, ma'am.

Frankie McNeil: The years that I was in south Memphis they were all great. We all ate out of the same kitchen.

Obediah Robinson: Now what was the reputation of south Memphis ___ has it changed?

Frankie McNeil: The reputation of south Memphis how has it changed?

Obediah Robinson: Yes, ma'am.

Frankie McNeil: I really hate to put it down, but it has changed a lot. Young man I don't know if you know it, but you know it's not a night past that we don't have a killing or stabbing. And I hate to say it, it really -- mostly in that neighborhood and ___.

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Obediah Robinson: Okay. What are some places in south Memphis that makes it a good place to live?

Frankie McNeil: Well, I believe a home is what you make it. And like I said, I don't want to put no neighborhoods down. A home is what you make it.

Obediah Robinson: Okay, what is the best thing about south Memphis?

Frankie McNeil: That I like now?

Obediah Robinson: Yes, ma'am.

Frankie McNeil: My church. White Stone Missionary Baptist Church. And the ___ where Dr. Watson is the president. And believe it or not, my pastor is on the staff there. Reverend Roger R. Brown and that's quite an accomplishment. I love that. I support it. My uncle died years ago. He was on the board of directors.

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And that I really love that college. Anything you love you're going to support it. You don't love it you're not going to support it. And I love my church. I support it. So that's two sides to Memphis that I truly, truly love.

Obediah Robinson: Okay, what do you think what would mostly south Memphis makes a better place?

Frankie McNeil: What would make it a better place?

Obediah Robinson: Yes, ma'am.

Frankie McNeil: Well, things that we're doing now. That would help make south Memphis a better place. And we've got to get out on the street and canvas and try to get these people -- now you know what? It starts in the home. And we get these mothers and fathers to discipline their children they would be better children. And then the church, the church is an outstanding place to send your child. We just had vacation bible school in our church. And we had close to 80 or 90 children every day.

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We feed them every day. And at the end our pastor, Reverend Roger R. Brown, gave them a picnic. And he looked just like he was a child out there trying to entertain and make those children feel welcomed. He not only did that, he made sure that they would come back to Sunday school. If we get them in Sunday school we be keeping them this church. He sent invitations to every parent there to bring their children to Sunday school. And this just happened last week.

Obediah Robinson: Yep. Okay. Do you have some fond memories of your life in south Memphis you could share?

Frankie McNeil: Yes, I have some fond memories. Like I said, I remember -- not Great Watch Stone.

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I have so much on my mind at 507 Williams I got my start at 475 Williams on Driver in a two room shack. But you know what? It was home. We were poor, but we didn't know it. Then we moved to 507 Williams where I stayed until I moved to 2056 Warn. So I have fond memories of south Memphis.

Obediah Robinson: Okay. Is there advice that you want to --

Stevion Young: Is there any advice that you would want to share with young people in south Memphis to know?

Frankie McNeil: Yes. Get a good education, because you're gonna need it.

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Obediah Robinson: Is there anything you would like to add on we have not encompassed?

Frankie McNeil: I believe I have covered everything. I can't think of anything else that I've missed. I am a talker.

Stevion Young: Actually we have one more question for you?

Frankie McNeil: Yes.

Stevion Young: With new innovations in south Memphis like College Park are you hopeful about the future of south Memphis?

Frankie McNeil: Yes, I am. I'm very hopeful, because I can see it coming back. I can see it. You see there's -- the Ivy Wells. Most of you all don't know it. That sign is right there in Mississippi and Walker. See I know south Memphis. You all know the second that Ivy Wells Sign?

Stevion Young: Uh-huh.

Frankie McNeil: That is a monument.

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Frankie McNeil: You should ___ ___ move. There is a building over there that someone has already bought. ___ ___ one of Memphis best beauticians. She became ill. And they put that building up for sale. And I'm hopeful that they will keep it like she did. At this time she resides in a nursing home. But she was one of the most prettiest beauty shops anybody could have. And the building is still standing there. It looks good. And I'm very hopeful that they will keep it looking that way.

And there's also the restaurant right up there ____. I eat up there every Sunday almost. I wish -- I can't think of the name of it.

Obediah Robinson: Four Way Grill.

Frankie McNeil: Four Way Grill, thank you, thank you. You know I hope I've been myself, because I am just that way.

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Four Way Grill. Now let me tell you something. I ate at the Four Way Grill when I was knee high to a duck. There was a lady that owned Four Way Grill. And then these people that owns it now. I went to school with the owner. He played football at Booker T. Washington High School. As a matter of fact I tried to get everybody I know to go up there and eat. They have the best lemon icebox platter that you can put in your mouth.

Obediah Robinson: Is the food better than it is back then?

Frankie McNeil: No. It's about the same, because this lady could really cook. And that's something about old homemade cooking. No it's not any better. I'm not saying it's worse, but it's not any better. Miss Cleave was the one who owned before she passed. And I like to say this. I had an uncle in ___ ___ Home.

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One of my black funeral homes Dan Gains was the first -- one of the first black morticians in Memphis, Tennessee. He worked there until he passed. Which is really about almost 25 years ago. But he was the mortician there. And he did all of the embalming. And when they couldn't find somebody that was really, really messed up and they couldn't get anybody to embalm them they called Dan Gains. I have a picture of him right now when he was a little boy at the age of you all. He started. And he had on knickerbockers. You know what knickerbockers are?

Obediah Robinson: No, ma'am.

Frankie McNeil: They're pants with come around your knee with elastic. So that's my reflections on south Memphis. I think I went all over, didn't I?

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Obediah Robinson: Yes, ma'am. Thank you ___ ___ Cross Roads to Freedom ___ ___.

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