

Cameron Norman: On behalf of South Memphis Shalom Zone and Crossroads to Freedom, thank you for taking the time to share your story today. Today's date is June 24, 2015. My name is Cameron Norman and I go to KIPP Collegiate High.

Charles Wagner: My name is Charles Wagner and I go to Hamilton High School.

Cameron Norman: Let's start out with some basic questions about yourself. Then we'll ask more specific questions about your neighborhood. What is your name?

Everlena Yarbrough: My name is Everlena C. Yarbrough.

Cameron Norman: If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Everlena Yarbrough: I was born in 1944.

Cameron Norman: Where were you born and raised.

Everlena Yarbrough: I was born in Mississippi, Tallahassee County. I was raised in Indianola, Mississippi, another little town called Schlater, Mississippi, and we later moved to North Memphis in 1959.

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Well in 1959 we moved back to Indianola Mississippi. I have an identical twin sister, so we moved back to Indianola, Mississippi, and we stayed there until 1960. Then we moved to a little town over in Arkansas called Marion, Arkansas, and that's where I really grew up at in Marion, Arkansas. I married Mr. Terry Yarbrough. We had two children, Terry and Wendy. And then I later moved to Memphis, Tennessee, back to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1970 and been in Memphis ever since.

Cameron Norman: You mentioned you moved a lot in Mississippi and Arkansas. How was that for you when you transitioned from one place to another? Was it hard on you?

Everlena Yarbrough: Well yes it was. It was a – those were some difficult days for my twin sister and I. My dad got killed.

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My mother had five children when he was killed, and she was pregnant with one. And it was really, really difficult for my mother to raise the children. So that's how we got to Indianola, Mississippi, because my dad's aunt agreed to help my mother to raise us. So they took the twins, which is my twin sister and I, and

reared us in Indianola. And then after we got teenage, we decided to come home and help mother to raise the other children by working in the fields.

Cameron Norman: Did you enjoy Memphis better than Arkansas and the cities in Mississippi?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes. Oh yes I do. I was able to really grow in Memphis. I started this area of the city, –

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which is the Soulsville area, in 1962. Over on Greenwood Street here there was a lady called Ms. Ellen Martin; she was a beautician. We was members of the church over in Arkansas, which was Second Saint John. She was the beautician that would fix everybody's hair, so we started coming over in '62 to get our hair fixed. So I come in contact with Soulsville back in '62 and from then we was always – it was always something going on that we would hear on Mclemore, purchasing what have you. That was a furniture company, I never will forget it, called Fitzgerald. My cousin Maddie lived here in the South Memphis area, and she had great credit throughout this area. And whenever we needed furniture, –

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we could always come to Fitzgerald Furniture and get the furniture on credit and pay later. So that was a good deal for us being able to get furniture on credit. So we maintained quite well during that period of time, and then later my twin sister and I we moved from one area of the city to another area, and we began to raise our children. And we migrated here on Stafford in 1976 and bought a home and been here ever since. And it has certainly been a fruitful area since I've been here. We own quite a bit of property here in this area now, so to me it's a gold mine, I'll say it like that. And I love living here and –

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working in the neighborhood and working with the neighborhood organization. I met a lady named Lorraine Jones, and she had an organization called South Memphis Citizens for Action. And I joined that organization and began to go to the city council meetings, county commissioner meetings and challenged the mayors and the county commissions on various things that was going on in the city that we felt in our neighborhood rather that we

felt like was not right. And I just grew from being around the older women in the neighborhood.

Charles Wagner: Okay. Back when you were young, you was telling that you were moving in and out of Memphis and Mississippi. Like what was the difference between Memphis and Mississippi when you were young?

Everlena Yarbrough: The difference between the two, well the town and the city, –

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was that in Mississippi my mother was a sharecropper, and the only jobs was in the cotton fields. And here when I moved to the city, I began to work in the factories such as a Trojan Luggage and David's Chair Company, and working in those factories was better than working in the field. So that was one of the difference. And we had freedom to schools when we moved to Arkansas. In Mississippi we didn't have freedom to school. I want you all to brace yourselves. When I was 13 years old, we went to school that day and we didn't go to the field. Well the plantation owner had –

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told my mother that he wanted us in the fields and not on the school buses. So we didn't take him at his word; we went to school that day. And we had this long distance to walk to get water, drinking water, so we had buckets that we would carry to get our water in. And we went to the well to get our water that day, and he knew about what time we would be coming. So he drove his truck round side of this house and he hid until we got to the wells and got our buckets full. And when we filled our buckets up, we started back home. Well, being 13 years old and trying to run with two buckets in each hand that was a little difficult. So we was running with the buckets trying to make it back home to mama.

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But he caught me and he caught me in the back of my shirt, and he pulled me all the way back to a tree. And he took and put a rope around each one of my wrists and tied me to a tree, and he beat me and he beat me. I was able to get loose, and I went home and I told mama that he had beat me. Well the other siblings had already ran back and told her what was going on, but she couldn't move. She just sat in this chair, and when I walked in, I fell down in front of her knees. And she began to cry. She said, "I gotta move. I gotta move to save my girls. I just gotta move."

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She said, "Lord, I just gotta move." So I was crying and she was crying, and she put some – well my back was whipped up and it burned when she would put the alcohol on my back, and I told her that it was burning me. And she said, "Well I'm just gonna put something on it and try to cool it down," 'cause the whipped was bleeding. So that year – this is how we transition from Mississippi to Memphis. That year she walked from Schlater, Mississippi, to Greenwood, Mississippi, and found this gentleman with this truck. And he come over one night about 12 o'clock, and she put us all on the back of the truck and she covered us over.

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We fled from the little town called Schlater to North Memphis out in Klondikes, and we stayed there until '60. My twin sister and I moved back to Indianola with our aunts to help work in the fields to help support mama with the children. So that's how we stayed there 'til 62 and then we moved back to Arkansas where mother was with the children, and we continued to work and go to school there at Felix High School there in Marion, Arkansas. So my life was a kind of rugged lifestyle, but through it all I'll be 71 years this old this coming October and I can say God has truly been good. I have two children. My son went to the Navy at the age of 17.

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My daughter went off to college at 17. He did 21 years and six months in the Navy; he retired. He now works at the Pentagon. My daughter went to Tennessee State. She graduated; she's now an engineer for Gulfstream down in Savannah, Georgia. So life is somewhat real good now for us, I would say real good. And that's why I fight so hard for the improvement of neighborhoods, because if neighborhoods can come up to the standards that we all can laugh and play and sing and shout sometime together in neighborhoods, it would be best for the generations that's coming on behind us.

Cameron Norman: You mentioned you worked in the fields and you work with this neighborhood organization. Were there any other occupations –

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that you worked in?

Everlena Yarbrough: I worked at Trojan Luggage; we made luggages. I worked at David's Chair Company; we made chairs. I worked at Darling

Store Fixtures; I was a reporter there for them. I traveled to Paragould, Arkansas, back to Memphis working for them. And then I went to work for Shirlough and I worked under the union, Teamsters Union. I was the executive board member and I was the trustee of the financial department of Teamsters. So through it all, it was – after the hurdle we was able to overcome, life began to bloom and blossom in our path.

Charles Wagner: If you don't mind me asking, before your husband died, what was his occupation?

Everlena Yarbrough: He was a tractor driver. No, he didn't die; we separated, we divorced. Mm-hmm.

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Cameron Norman: If you don't mind me asking you, what happened to make you guys divorce?

Everlena Yarbrough: Another woman, outside woman. So that was the cause of the divorce. Outside interference.

Charles Wagner: Excuse me. If you can, can you describe how your parents were?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes. My daddy was a traveling salesman. He sold cosmetic on the bicycle during his lifetime. My mother was a sharecropper; that was her occupation.

Cameron Norman: You mentioned your children, you have two children, and they went off to college.

Everlena Yarbrough: Yeah.

Cameron Norman: What were their names?

Everlena Yarbrough: Terry Dwayne, and Wendy René Yarbrough.

Cameron Norman: Some beautiful names.

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You mentioned a lot about your home life and that you were moving around a lot and you worked in the fields. Were there any like good times that you remember when you were younger?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes, working the fields. Let me elaborate on that. In working the fields during the picking cotton season, I always liked to pick three rows: One, two, three. And in doing that I helped pull as much as

119 pounds in one sack in picking cotton. I used to love picking cotton. I used to love chopping cotton. I didn't have no gripes about working in the fields because truly I started working in the fields and I was able to – the Lord was able to show me –

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better things and bigger things than working in the field. And then after my son grew up at the age of 14, I sent him back to Mississippi to work in the fields; down in Indianola, Mississippi, he worked in the fields. And in working in the fields, that's where he got his desire to go to the Navy once he graduated high school. And he wanted to be a pilot for the Navy. He had that opportunity. He flew for a while until his ears began to pop and they could never find out what was causing that, so he had to restrain from flying. And then he become a navigator on the ships. So the fields was good for us. It give us a real outlook, a better outlook on life and what you can accomplish.

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I credit all of that to the fields, 'cause my son probably wouldn't have went to the Navy and become the man that he is today. He graduated Georgetown last year, so I credit all that to the fields. And I would have sent my grandchildren to the fields if there had been some fields to go to. So I don't have no regrets from the fields.

Charles Wagner: How did segregation impact your education experience?

Everlena Yarbrough: Oh very much. When we was in school in Schlater, Mississippi, we could not study from new books. We had to get used books, and those books some of the pages was tore out of the books.

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And it was just difficult during that period of time and when segregation was going on. And once we moved to Arkansas, our books was better. So it had a big impact.

Cameron Norman: How did you handle these situations given used books and the segregation of the school? Like what'd you do to cope with it?

Everlena Yarbrough: We would come home and there was a storyteller would tell stories, and we would – she was our own aunt she would tell stories that night and we would take the books, and she would look at the books and said, "I can give you all the better sense of understanding –

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than these books give. And she would move the books to the side and she would tell us stories about life in general, about how to do and what to do and what to say, what not to say. And one of the old slangs was, "Walk the walk and talk the talk." If you don't walk the walk, you won't be able to talk the talk. Those was the kind of stories that she would tell us, and we grew from that. We held dear to those stories that they would tell us.

Cameron Norman: How have those stories influenced you throughout your life, like today for instance?

Everlena Yarbrough: Oh very much, very much because, as I just said, I walks the walk
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and I certainly talks the talk now. I walk upright and I talk the talk that an upright person would talk. So it has influenced my life tremendous.

Cameron Norman: What church do you attend?

Everlena Yarbrough: I'm with Covenant Restoring Ministry at 691 East Mclemore. I serve there on the ministerial staff.

Cameron Norman: What was your church like during when you were little? Did you grow up in that church?

Everlena Yarbrough: No. I grew up in a church in Mississippi. It was a good life. We was baptized out in the lake called Voyagers Lake.

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And we went to the mourners' bench. You just didn't go and go up and say I wanna be baptized. You had to go through a process, and that process was from Monday through Friday sitting on the mourners' bench. And you would go and ask one of the elders in the church to pray for you all that week that you could seek God for yourself. And growing up under that, it give me a better outlook on life as of today. And at the age of five, before I was baptized, this elder lady wanted me to be an usher in the church. And I helped _____ that, and I think as of today, I still look at Ms. Ida Bunch as asking me to be an usher, —

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'cause to me just seem like I do those kinds of things now. I had what you call a rooming house and I have tenants that I takes care, and just look like to me every day I can see myself performing the duties of an usher by doing things for them. So it had a tremendous impact in my life.

Charles Wagner: What does South Memphis mean to you?

Everlena Yarbrough: South Memphis means the world to me because South Memphis, if I may say, a sunflower and a sunflower blossom. And when it blossom out, it's a great big beautiful bloom, and that's what South Memphis means to me, a big sunflower –

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that blossom out. And everybody that passes a sunflower, they takes time and they look at that sunflower. So that's what South Memphis means to me.

Cameron Norman: What was South Memphis like in the '60s and '70s?

Everlena Yarbrough: It was a beautiful place. I take Mclemore for an example. Mclemore was a beautiful street. It had beautiful homes, and it had – whatever you needed you could find it on Mclemore. It was just a beautiful place and a nice place to come and visit. You know we had restaurants, a donut shop, service station, icehouse.

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A club, churches, whatever stores, furniture stores, hardware stores, a theater; we had a theater. So you could find whatever you wanted in South Memphis. You know very, very few even would go out of South Memphis to go to visit the malls. I remember when they built the Southland Mall. It was a long time before we went to Southland Mall because we would always think we had everything here so why go out to Southland Mall. So it was a nice area to live in.

Cameron Norman: What were the differences when you were growing up versus now?

Everlena Yarbrough: It's not enough I would say –

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Children is not being raised in the fashion that I would say they should be raised in. There's no obedience. There's no really discipline of children, so that's a no-no from when I was being raised. Other parents could discipline your children, but now other

parents can't discipline your children. So it's not the way it was when I was growing up because anybody could say, "Stop, don't do that." And you adhered to what they were saying, but now it doesn't work like that.

Cameron Norman: Would you say that the reputation of South Memphis has changed?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes, tremendous.

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Cameron Norman: Would you like to elaborate about that?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes, yeah. Love. Love has left the market. There's no love, and where there's no love, there is perish. So that's one of the things that we don't have. See when I moved here in South Memphis there was a lady named Nellie Rogers, Ms. Nellie Rogers. She was the bread lady. And the bread company would come and bring the bread and put it on her porch, and all of the parents in this neighborhood who had children that wanted bread or cakes, Nellie Rogers' heart was for feeding the children. See we don't have that now, so that is a big difference in the way the neighborhood is going now.

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There's no more love. See Nellie Rogers had a heart full of love, because her love was for the children to make sure that they was getting the right kind of nourishment. We don't have that now. So when there is no love, the people perish. So South Memphis is lacking of love now. Take myself for an instance, not trying to brag, just speaking. I live at Carleton – I live at Stafford rather, it runs across Neptune. But Neptune comes into a one-way and it leads you into the town center. Well in that area, I guess they just come through there with all their garbage and they just throw it out over there. Old tires, whatever, they just dump it out over there.

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Well I takes time, time after time, and I go put on some gloves and get my dog and we will go down and we'll clean up the alley. Well that's the love that I'm showing to the neighborhood. I want the neighborhood to look like my street. See I'm very much concerned about my street. I live on Stafford. I don't like nobody to throw paper on the street. I don't like nobody to let the yards grow up tall, because we are a neighborhood. And if one keep their yards groomed, then everybody must keep their yards groomed. That's my way in my neighborhood, and I'm concerned

about the citizen in my neighborhood. I goes by and check on the elders. And so in doing that that gives the other neighbors a sense of pride in me.

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They'll start calling me the pillar of the neighborhood now because I'm concerned about the neighbors. So that's one of the things that's a walk that we go back to what I said, if you talk the talk, you must walk the walk.

Charles Wagner: What do you think would make South Memphis a better place?

Everlena Yarbrough: What would make South Memphis a better place? Some of the things that's going on now in South Memphis. The neighborhood association, and I love it. I'm the chaplain of the Soulsville Neighborhood Association, and I love it. We meet every first Monday night of the month, and different ones from the community tells about what's going on in their neighborhood.

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And that making South Memphis now go back to that big sunflower blossom, because peoples now are getting concerned about their neighborhood. And now we have began to move in a direction that we are all connecting together.

Cameron Norman: You mentioned that South Memphis was very fruitful and has blossomed. What is the best thing about South Memphis in your opinion?

Everlena Yarbrough: The best thing about South Memphis is my neighbors, is my neighbors may I say, and then where I live. I love living in South Memphis. I truly love living in South Memphis, here. Let me say it like this. I truly I love living in Soulsville.

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And it's blossomed. It's a big sunflower. And everybody pass by and they can look at the sunflower. You know I have a piece of property here at College and Mclemore, and I was up last week grooming that property. I just didn't stop at my property. I kept trash bags with me. I come all the way up to Mclemore, pick all of the trash up, and then I had my lawnmower. Then I groomed the whole downside of the streets, because I'm concerned. And I feel like in doing that, other neighbors will see me and they will do it too. So you use yourself as an example. Then somebody else will take after you.

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And so I went back up the other day just to look in and check the area out, and the neighbors next door they was out grooming. So when you do certain things in the neighborhood, others will follow after you. You set an example of others to follow you.

Charles Wagner: How would you compare race relationships in Memphis then and now?

Everlena Yarbrough: Race relationship then and now? Well back in the now, unions was involved. And in having unions –

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there was a relationship, because there was a spokesperson for the peoples. And now we don't have that. It's every man for himself, and God loves all. We have nobody that can speak for us, so we're living in some difficult times now, very difficult times. And as I said earlier, love plays a key role in it all, and where there's no love the peoples perish. So that's what I see now.

Charles Wagner: Is there any advice that you would want the young people in South Memphis to know?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes. Yes I would. Oh yes. The advice I would give to the young people.

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Obedience is the first cue. Be obedient. Study hard. Love yourself and then you surely will love the next person. That would be the advice that I would give to young people.

Cameron Norman: Anything that you would like to go over that we haven't covered in this interview?

Everlena Yarbrough: I have some grandchildren and great-grands. I have a granddaughter, Brandy. Brandy works for the government in Washington D.C. She works in the patent office. She does all the Bill Gates and Melinda Gates patents. I have a granddaughter, Terry A., she works in the medical field. She works there in D.C. also.

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And she travels the country going from state to state or country to country doing research work for the company that she works for.

And I have a granddaughter, Ivery, she works for Gulfstream. Gulf Stream makes the jumbo jets where my daughter, Wendy, she's the engineer there. And she travels for the company also in buying parts or making sure things are right. And my grandson he's a student at Ohio State. He plays lacrosse; this is his second year there. And my granddaughter, Every, she's a student at Howard University. So things are quite well, –

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and all of that started with the children and the grandchildren, it started out of South Memphis. It started from here. They got to be focused from here. They would come home and I would teach them how to be concerned about their neighborhood and how to do this and how to do that. They got it all from here. That's their starting in South Memphis and that has spreaded overall.

Cameron Norman: Your grandchildren are in a lot of different fields and universities and colleges.

Everlena Yarbrough: Yeah.

Cameron Norman: What were their motivations to keep going through school and overcome their obstacles?

Everlena Yarbrough: South Memphis. I have to give it to South Memphis. They got all of that from here.

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My son played music here at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church. Professor Goodlowe, which is right here in Mclemore and Inglewood, Professor Goodlowe taught him in music there. And that's why I say South Memphis. My daughter ran track at Central High School, started out of South Memphis running down the streets. My grandchildren they got their start out of South Memphis. They would come home and I would teach them how to clean a vacant lot, how to be concerned about the neighborhood. All started out of South Memphis. They didn't get anything from Washington D.C. or Savannah, Georgia.

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They only when they went there they was able to continue on, but they started out of South Memphis.

Cameron Norman: Hmm. Is there any changes you would like to see in the neighborhood?

Everlena Yarbrough: Yes. I would like to see more togetherness in neighbors in the neighborhoods.

Charles Wagner: Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

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