

[0:00:00]

Cheryl Cotton:

Good morning. I'm Cheryl Fanion Cotton and I want to read something that I wrote. Several years ago I was up and couldn't sleep and I went to my computer feeling a little blue. And I said "Cheryl, why don't you write down some of the things you've done in life." So that's what I did.

So these are called the "I Haves Of My Life." I have attended church all of my life. My church is here in South Memphis. Saint Mary United Methodist Church. I have loved and respected all of God's creations. I have dutifully accepted servanthood as a way of life.

I earned my high school diploma from Booker T. Washington high school in 1968. I grew up in the Civil Rights Movement and marched with Dr. King. I have pictures in the Ernest Withers Museum downtown and I looked for it last night and I just could not find it.

I earned my college degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1973.

[0:01:00]

I attended the school of theology at Boston University in 1974, where Dr. King earned his PhD. I attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary from 1975-1978 and I earned a Masters Divinity Degree from Memphis Theological Seminary in 2000.

I was a student chaplain at the old St. Joseph Hospital in Memphis and my job was to go around and pray in the rooms of patients. But I always asked for permission. And one of the men that I prayed for was the late Reverend Oris Mays from Boston Baptist Church.

I was the caregiver of two high school friends. The first one lived right here on College and she succumbed to Multiple Sclerosis and her name was Joyce Parker. And then my dear friend Martha Porter who grew up in LeMoyne Garden and the family lived here for 56 years.

[0:02:00]

And Ms. Porter was the last resident to move out of LeMoyne Garden. We had to pull her out.

I married a guy that I met in Pittsburgh and we came south. And I went to work for Russ College where my ex husband still works for Russ College as a grant writer. So at Russ College I set up the Talent Search Program, which is one of the Department of Education's TRIO Programs. You guys have heard of Upward Bound? Upward Bound? Everybody's heard of that. That's a program for you kids.

But the TRIO Department of Ed had major programs. One of them was a Talent Search Program and I worked for Russ and what I did was I went around and recruited Russ College students, largely internationals to go into about seven high schools and we would tutor you guys for the state exam. So that's what I did for Russ.

I traveled through East Africa, visiting Nairobi, Kenya – that's where I land.

[0:03:00]

I did 3,000 ground miles of travel once I got to East Africa. So I visited Nairobi, Kenya. I went to Tanzania. I went to Uganda. I crossed the Serengeti plains. While there in Africa, I stood at the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro and sang with the choir that I went to Africa with. I've swam in Lake Victoria. I visited the Ngorogoro Crater.

And I also sand on the only black TV station in Nairobi. As a result of the lady who helped us to get or trip together in Pittsburgh. What it was – I attended a university church and it was ecumenical and interracial and we formed a gospel choir. There were about seven ministers. And a lady at the University of Pitt was over all the international students and she said, "You guys are so good, would you like to go to Africa?"

[0:04:00]

So for two years we raised \$18,000 and took 15 college students to Africa. So that's how I got to Africa. And that's why we were singing.

And at Mt. Kilimanjaro they had a group of African students who were like part of a Y – that's the best way – and we sang to them and they sang to us. And we couldn't speak their language and they couldn't speak our language. But it proved that music is a universal language. Okay.

I also got to visit \_\_\_\_\_ in Kenya and to observe the country's

government. I stayed in London for three days on my way to Africa. Which was my first trip. I visited Buckingham Palace, saw the Queen's crown jewels and visited Piccadilly Square in London. I stopped for a layover in Paris.

In 1974 – I graduated in '73 from Pitt – I was invited to the 26<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the World's Students Christian Federation and it was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

[0:05:00]

I was part of the North American delegation made up of Canadians and Americans. There were 89 countries in attendance.

I made a speech to the entire General Assembly and the way it was set up – if you know the UN and you have people sitting behind each country – that's how I was as a student at this Christian Conference.

So when I would put up on my headphones, they had five interpreters. So if you were English speaking, then you could listen in on English. Remember, 89 countries, kids from France, South Africa, everywhere. So we all spoke different language.

And one of the things that that experience taught me is how as Americans we don't bother to learn other people's languages, do we? Anybody in Spanish? Anybody in French? Learn the language because God may bless you to go all over the world like I did.

[0:06:00]

And that was a thing that I saw as a 20-something year old. God, I can't speak anybody's language! But the students who were there spoke two or three languages. So when I went to workshops, I would have to hook up with somebody from Brazil or wherever that spoke languages so that they could interpret for me. So I was at a disadvantage, wasn't I? Being an American. One of the greatest countries in the world.

I stayed in London for three days on my visit and I told you about that. So in '74 I attended the 26<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the World Student Christian Federation. They meet every four years. So if I was there at the 26<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Addis Ababa, then that means that the organization had to be about 80 years old. I was part of the North American. I told you about that. I was only one of two

African-Americans who made up the North American delegation. The Vietnam War was going on. So one of the things that they asked all of us to do was to protest at the American Embassy.

[0:07:00]

So all of us as students went over the American Embassy and Ethiopia and we had protest signs asking them to end the war in there. I also attended a reception at the palace of the late Emperor, Haile Selassie.

And right over here in South Memphis, my Granddad used to always talk about Haile Selassie. He is believed to have come from the line of David in the Bible. On my way to Ethiopia I got way delayed. International flights they overbook. Here I am, by myself, traveling from New York. I changed planes in the Rome, Italy airport about three in the morning, alone as a 22 year-old.

[0:08:00]

I had a 24-hour layover in Athens, Greece on my way to Ethiopia due to the overbooking of international flights. So what did I do? I explored Athens by bus, train and incline to reach the highest lookout point in Greece.

Also, another highlight of my life as a young person. I was a participant in a panel discussion on the Sermon on the Mount, filmed in the same studio as the Today Show in New York City. My host that got me this interview on NBC was the American Bible Society. They put me up in a swank New York hotel and took me to Broadway shows after the taping in Studio B.

The nationally aired Sunday morning program was shown across the U.S., even here in Memphis. I have never seen it because when it was shown in Memphis I was on a flight back to Pittsburgh. So to date – I've thought about calling Ms. Claudia Barr who was Ms. BTW and graduated with my sister in '67 – I graduated in '68 – to see if I could go to the TV station and try to go in the archives and see if could I do that.

[0:09:00]

But the Sunday morning program was shown across the U.S., even here in Memphis on a local station.

I have lived in Memphis, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, St. Petersburg, Florida, Tupelo, Oxford, Meridian and Holly Springs. Also, if you go down to the Civil Rights Museum there is a documentary that

you can buy in the gift shop called *The Witness*. And I am in the opening frame of *The Witness*.

I have never seen that either, but my good friend Julian Bolton called me one night in Holly Springs and he was whispering and I said, “Julian, why you whispering?” He said, “I’m at the Peabody for the premiere of *The Witness* and you are in the opening frame and they’ve got you up on the frame and nobody in the whole world knows who that is.” Julian was my first boyfriend ever in the world so we go back. Okay. (*Laughter*)

[0:10:00]

I’m in the opening frame of the movie of *The Witness*, a documentary of the Civil Rights Movement as a 17 year-old civil rights activist. I raised \$3,000 when I was in high school for the Memphis branch of the NAACP and this is while I was graduating in 1968. I vacation. I’ve been all over. I go to Montego Bay, Negril, Ochos Ríos, that’s all in Jamaica. And I do destine at least two or three times a year. That’s why I have on a Seaside t-shirt.

I was formerly married to attorney Quincy O. Cotton. Together we raised two beautiful girls. **Indira** who is now 31 and a kindergarten teacher at Ford Road Elementary. And **Noree** Cotton who is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at Ridgeway Middle. My kids were raised in Holly Springs where I lived for 21 years and I was able to raise girls who were Honor Students from K-12. And they both were sent to Ole Miss and they both earned bachelors and masters degrees.

[0:11:00]

My 25 year old – when I wrote this, so this has to be about 3 years old – my 25 year old **Noree** made it into the Ole Miss Hall of Fame for academics and she appeared in the November 11 issue of *Essence Magazine*. I have also served as an Interim Pastor of Strickland United Methodist Church in Byhalia, Mississippi. And I served there because the minister there got in some trouble. Okay.

So I served there until the new pastor was appointed. My appointment was given by the first black female District Superintendent of the United Methodist Church for the North Mississippi Conference. And that minister is located down in Senatobia, Mississippi. I’ve been a GED teacher for 27 years. I have helped so many adults in Mississippi and here in Memphis to get their GED. So that’s truly where my heart lies.

[0:12:00]

I helped a man in Mississippi who was 70 years old named Phillip Robins and he was from Suriname, South America. And he said in his country you only get an education to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. So nobody got an education. I'll give you a quick story here. He gave me some money one day. He said, "Ms. Cotton, will you send this home to my family?" And it was like, the way I was counting, numerically, it was like \$3,000. And I said, "Boy, your family is gonna be really happy to get this." He said, "Ms. Cotton, when you send this they may be able to get bread and some vegetables. They will not be able to buy meat with this."

So do we live in a great country and do we have wonderful opportunities that we often take for granted? And I know you all would agree with me, yes. So I was a GED teacher for Northwest Community College 11.5 years. I helped 120 students to earn their GED. I tutored rural students who attended the Benton Marshall Vocational Center in Ashland, Mississippi, the home to the Farice law firm.

[0:13:00]

The oldest student was Mr. Phillip Robbins and I loved the man so much that I brought him to Memphis for Thanksgiving because I didn't want him to be down there and introduced him to my Dad and everybody. Everybody knew how much – He took that test four times. The GED test is made up of five subjects: Math, Science, Social Studies, Interpreting Literature and the Arts, and Writing which includes a 250 word essay.

So to get a 70 – Now he was 72 when he got his GED. And I sent him to the test four times. And the vocational counselor at Howard Springs High School was also the football coach and I went and told Coach Greer, "Coach Greer. Y'all gotta help me help Mr. Robbins pass his GED. We might have to go in the closet and look and talk and everything." But on that fifth time that man passed that GED test and got his GED at 72 years old and went back to work. And here I thought "My chest is out, I've done something great." I didn't. 'Cause after he left me he went and bought a car that had a standard shift and he taught himself to drive.

[0:14:00]

So, I thought, "Oh, I haven't done anything." Okay. As a volunteer, I also ran the Marshall County Literacy Council. Holly

Springs, straight down 78, about 30 miles, is Holly Springs, Mississippi and my husband was Public Defender and the only black private attorney there for years. And we're great friends. He was at my house last night. We take our grown kids to Seaside, Florida every year. That's how great a relationship we have.

As a volunteer, I started with the Marshall County Literacy Council as a volunteer. I helped to run, along with Roman Catholic nuns, those who are my friends, the Marshall County Literacy Council, where literacy and GED classes were held. I've been training in the Each One Teach One Program and the Laubach Literacy Program. All literacy programs in the United States they've changed their name to pro-literacy, but William C. Laubach was a missionary.

[0:15:00]

And I can't remember the country he went to but if you want to know where Each One Teach One comes from – and I've met his grandson, Laubach's grandson. We invited him to Holly Springs for GED graduation and he spoke to us. The interesting thing about William C. Laubach was Laubach went to another country, learned their language, and then went back and educated the tribal chief. Him speaking his language, he could communicate.

And he taught the tribal chief to read. And when the money went out and the missionary had to come back to America the tribal chief said, "Each one teach one or they're gonna get their head cut off." So that's the story about how we go all over the world and help people. Of course they come here too. I thought if you looked him up, William C. Laubach.

[0:16:00]

He is considered to be the father of literacy. Now, me as an African American, I give that title to Frederick Douglas. And if you've ever read the Slave Narratives of Frederick Douglas you will know that Frederick Douglas was a slave and he got moved to Maryland or somewhere. He got new slave masters. And the white woman of the family was teaching her son to read and so Frederick Douglas was also brought in and the woman's husband came in and saw this woman trying to teach her son and Frederick Douglas to read. And he got real upset and that ended that.

But Frederick Douglas realized in his mind, "Wow, learning to read." He equated that with freedom. "Boy, if I learned to read

nobody can keep me a slave forever.” So I would encourage you, because I am big on reading, boys and girls, young men, young women, take reading seriously. When you go back to school this year, take reading seriously. We don’t read, do we? We stay on our phones. I guess we are reading.

[0:17:00]

But I am saying: building vocabulary, things like that. I wish I could have got to my storage unit because and maybe Jackie can have me come back and I can do it with you guys, I can teach you about five tips that will help you to read anything and get your right answer. Wouldn’t you like to go back to school knowing that? I bet you would, wouldn’t you? Okay. I’ll be done in just a few seconds.

I served for ten years as a member of the North Mississippi Literacy Alliance, which was made up of literacy councils throughout the North Memphis area. So that would have been Desoto, Tunica, Carmen, New Albany, Tate County, Panola County. I was their Treasurer for about ten years and I never misplaced a teacher. Now to my most recent life. I’ve been a Special Ed teacher for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in the Holly Spring School District. I did that for seven years. I’ve just been in Memphis because I was preparing to speak at my church, for both services.

[0:18:00]

I was gonna do the 8 o’clock service and the 10:30 service. This was December ‘09; the date was December the 26<sup>th</sup>. I got a job with **Menansis** in August so I was living with my Mom and just running back, checking on my home in Holly Springs. And I was there writing my sermon that Saturday night and I got a call from my neighbor who said that my house was on fire. And by the time I drove from Memphis to Holly springs, my house had burned to the ground so I lost everything I owned and that’s a horrible, horrible situation.

I wish I could have found the Maya Angelou poem *And Still I Rise*, because y’all have heard it before. That’s the story of my life. And it’s a story for you all for you all’s life. We don’t know what’s gonna befall you as you go out from high school to be young people, to be gainfully employed. But whatever happens to you, you have to have in your mind that no matter what happens I can still get up.

[0:19:00]

And the Bible illustrates this and I don't want to go into my theological degree but Jesus told Lazarus, "Take up your mat and walk." And so the reason I became a teacher is because I wanted to help young people literally to take up their mats and walk into whatever future you have envisioned for yourself. Okay. I'm at the end.

So I've been a Special Ed teacher with Shelby County schools starting in **Menansis** 2009 and then I went to Hamilton about three years after that. Through all of that, I have worked as a part time GED instructor with Mass & Vo Tech. So after this, if anybody's got anybody in their family that needs a GED, holler at me. I will give you my cell phone number. I can hook you up like a tow truck. No joke. Okay. Alright. Hobbies. I write prayers for all occasions. One of my goals would be to one day get them published. A lot of them perish. When you go to seminary they tell you to write your prayers down, pastoral prayer, so that you can pray for things that are going on in your community.

[0:20:00]

So I write prayers. I can do it spontaneously. But I prefer to write it and people can keep up with where you are going with it. Personal belief. The ways in which we are similar are far greater than the ways in which we are different. Where did I get that from? When I was on the program in New York, basketball players with the Boston team. What's the Boston team? NBA. Are they Celtics? Okay. One of the guys, older guys, oh I can't think of his name. Anyway, his brother came here to film at our church the Civil Rights Movement with James Lawson being my pastor. That's why I went to seminary. He was kind of the intellectual theorist. He had studied non-violence.

[0:21:00]

So I grew up in a church where non-violence was preached on some level generally every Sunday. So I learned what a pacifist is. You may not know what a pacifist is. But a pacifist is what? A person that doesn't believe in what?

*Audience:* Violence.

*Cheryl Cotton:* War. And violence. We need more of those today don't we. So I write prayers. So I went to this play off Broadway while I was there in New York and it was called *Five on the Black Hand Side*

and the theme of that play was the ways in which we are similar are far greater than the ways in which we are different. So I just put that in my head and I think out of that understanding.

Favorite scripture. In everything, give thanks for this is the will of god concerning you. And then I finally said, I listed these experiences to give my daughters before I become too old – I really did this to give to my two daughters so they would know what Mom had done. Then changing life experience. One. The Civil Rights Movement involvement 1968.

[0:22:00]

My pastor was Reverend James Lawson, former pastor of Seminary United Church, invited Dr. King to Memphis. He was a well-respected pacifist. And he was the intellectual theorist behind – and they used our Sunday school rooms at seminary so I met everybody, Dr. King, Abernathy, Andy Young, Jesse Jackson, they all hung out at my church. And I lived diagonal from the back of my church. So my Mom would fix food and I'd tote plates over there to all of the people that were meeting in our church.

And my childhood friend was Natalie Jones Catchings. Some of you all may know her. She just retired as a great principal here in the city. I'm just naming some people who can back up my story. That were in the movement with me. And Natalie Jones Catchings. I wanna say Idlewild or Snow. Somewhere over in the midtown area. She was with me.

[0:23:00]

Also Jesse Turner Junior could corroborate the stories that I told you today because his Dad was the Treasurer of the NAACP. So I grew up with these people. Also, how did I really get involved? I lived at 561 Edith and across the street from me was the late and great Maxine Smith who was with the NAACP here for many, many years. A couple of doors up from Dr. Smith, her husband, who was a dentist, was the late Judge Anthony Johnson. Tony Johnson. And he was – I don't know how many Christmases ago, we lost two black lawyers on one Christmas Eve and one of the them was Tony Johnson.

Now two doors up from there was Kirk Whalum's grandmother. So Kirk and Kenneth Whalum's mother's mother lived across the street from me. So I grew up in a great neighborhood with a lot of great great great great great great people.

[0:24:00]

So Mrs. Smith and my dad were very good friends. So when we started having the meetings down at Clayborn Temple, the mass meetings. Everybody would come to a meeting because Dr. King was trying to organize the movement here. I lead all of the Freedom Songs to get the crowd all worked up. Mrs. Smith would say “Cheryl, come on. We gotta be at Clayborn Temple. And I want you to get the crowd the started.”

So I’d sing “Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, over me / And before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave / And go home to my lord and be free.” So I knew all of the songs. Also, in 1968, I can’t remember, I meant to call a friend who went with me. **Margie** Bradfield. We left Booker T. Washington to go on a march. Some of the teachers were for us. Some of the teachers were against us. The teachers that were against us – After we went to Washington and slept on air mattresses in white churches, they tried to fail us.

[0:25:00]

So my Dad had to go to the Board and stand on a couple of tables and say, “These girls,” it was three of us, “it’s April. How you gonna fail them? They’ve been going to school from August to May. How you gonna fail them?” So my Dad really had to stand up for us to get them to go on and give us our grades and not try to hold us back in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Okay. I left to attend the Poor People’s Campaign.

I graduated with my class of 1968. Former Mayor Dr. Willy Herenton had just competed his first year as principal at our school. The Bar-Kay James Alexander, we were in the same grade all of our life and we walked home together everyday. James Alexander is the meathead that plays the bass guitar little short guy. That’s Jackie and that guy was our – And we’re still great friends. Finally, my trips, because I am talking about game-changers, my trips to Africa were absolutely amazing.

[0:26:00]

Crossing the \_\_\_\_\_ in a sunroof Land Rover with tour guides. I crossed the Serengeti Plains. It was almost an eight-hour trip. Later sang as a member of the choir. I went to Kilimanjaro, though we could not communicated, it proved to us that music is a universal language. Finally, and I have a picture of this in my bag, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I met at a reception in his palace the late Emperor Haile Selassie.

We were students at attendance at the World Student Christian Conference representing 89 countries but we were all introduced to the emperor at an evening reception. And I brought in my bag and I can show it to you later. I had one picture that I just kept with me and would not let anybody have it and it was me being introduced to the emperor Haile Selassie. So, I've been busy. And I've had a great time.

[0:27:00]

Okay. I'm done.

*Cameron Norman:* Good morning Ms. Cotton. We are so grateful to have you here and to share your story. It's been a pleasure so far. On behalf of South Memphis Shalom Zone, Knowledge Quest and Crossroads to Freedom at Rhodes College we would like to thank you for taking time to share your story today. Today's date is July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. And we would like to ask you more specific questions about the community and how was it during the time you – Where were you born?

*Cheryl Cotton:* I was born here in Memphis and I grew up in walking distance from here. And South Memphis was a great place to grow up and I will give you the number one reason that I believe. I grew up in the segregated Memphis. Okay. We could only go to the zoo on Thursdays.

[0:28:00]

If the school took us to the Orpheum, the African American kids had to sit up in the balcony, right Jackie? I grew up in the segregated South. But there is a blessing everywhere you look. What was the difference between the segregated communities in South Memphis and where we are right now? We were self-contained. So Jackie can verify this.

Some of our classmates' daddies were barbers. So you knew where you could get your hair cut. Bubba Judge Grafton was down in Belleview and Macklemore. He was probably the only black shoe cobbler in the city. That was my uncle. And at Christmas time we waited for him, 'cause he was gonna come through the doors and have a beautiful pair of blue alligator boots that he actually made. Leather vests that he actually made.

[0:29:00]

I knew where I took my Dad's shirts to be cleaned. I knew where I went to the beauty shop. I worked with *Stax Records*. A long time ago, right across the street was a *Stax Records* record shop. So I worked there until my mother came one evening to pick me up and we played the records so you could hear them all over the neighborhood and I was playing "Somebody's Been Sleeping in My Bed," and my Mama said, "You gotta go to retail."

So I stopped working for the *Stax Record* – [Cell Phone Ringing] Is that me? I thought it was you guys. Nobody calls me. I apologize. I apologize. Oh, **Cocoa** Pharmacy is calling me to tell me my medicine is ready. One thing I want to tell you is since I've been going through this cancer thing – Some lady who I do not even know sends me a scripture or an inspirational message every day.

[0:30:00]

So before we leave I'm going to read you this little short message, 'cause I read it this morning and I said, "Oh, I gotta tell the kids this."

*Cameron Norman:* You mentioned that this community was segregated in your time. How did that impact your education?

*Cheryl Cotton:* We had the greatest teachers in the world. My 12<sup>th</sup> grade history teacher was the great Nat D. Williams of WDIA. And I was a Teen Town Singer and that's how I got my first scholarship to college. Was being a Teen Town Singer on WDIA. Who were the people who were in the Teen Towns?

Now whenever I go to our little reunions, I'm the youngest thing there. So you got Fred Davis. You got Mark **Stansbury**. You got Dr. Herenton's sister. All of the people that I associate with that are Singing and you got Carla Thomas. You got a brother **Marval** Thomas. These are the people that I hang out with when I go to WDIA reunions. So I got my first 500 from singing on the radio and then my Dad hooked me up in the Civil Rights Movement with Roman Catholic nuns.

[0:31:00]

So whenever we went to march, I was always hanging on to a hand of a Roman Catholic nun and a lot of them were from Siena College, which is where the old college used to be and as a result

of that Sister **Adrienne** Mary helped me get a 500 dollar scholarship to Siena College. So I actually went to Pitt in my sophomore year. I did a year here. And I think there were about eight black females that got into Siena. And Siena was the girls' school to Christian Brothers.

*[Side Conversation]*

*Obdieah Robinson:* What do South Memphis mean to you?

*Cheryl Cotton:* It was just a great community. As I said we were self-contained. It's so different from today because you'll hear a lot of your grandparents say, "You know, when I was growing up, if you did something bad, you were gonna get it from your neighbor and then you were gonna get it from your parents." I think that's something that's missing.

*[0:32:00]*

You know people are afraid to say anything to people's children, wouldn't you say? Today is that true with kids? Mom doesn't want anybody else chastising you but her, correct?

*Obdieah Robinson:* Yes ma'am.

*Cheryl Cotton:* But in our community, our neighbors – You know, if they saw Cheryl doing something wrong, they were gonna tell Blanche and Jerry Fanion before God got the news. Excuse me. God is omniscient. Omnipresent. Omnipotent.

*Cameron Norman:* You mentioned that you were in the Civil Rights Movement. Who inspired you to join?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Well, James Lawson being my pastor at my church – The really great thing about James Lawson and I've heard split over this – James Lawson – 'cause it was a middle class church – James Lawson came right here were you are sitting and got young people out of LeMoyne Garden and brought them to our church.

*[0:33:00]*

So, we had a wonderful, Methodist youth fellowship. So James Lawson really focused on young people. And I have a funny story to tell you. I was in confirmation class right before Easter. I think they were gonna bring us into the church on Palm Sunday. I've never fought in my life because I grew up under a minister that preached, "We love. We don't hate and we don't do war."

But I got to fighting in the Sunday school class and Reverend Lawson wouldn't let me and the other young man – Actually, I just pushed him out of a folding chair. And he was sitting here going like that right there, big ol' fat guy – And I pushed him and he went flat. And Reverend Lawson had stopped. So when he came back, all the kids said, “Cheryl and Michael were fighting Reverend Lawson.” He wouldn't let us join the church. And I really think that's what prompted me to go and get a religious degree because I thought, “Now Mama's bought white socks, white underwear, white dress, white ribbons and I can't join the church.”

[0:34:00]

And I cried and I cried and Mama begged him but he still wouldn't let us join the church. On Palm Sunday. I guess he said, “Y'all don't really get it. So I'm gonna have to go back in that little room and talk to you guys.” And so we didn't get to join the church with everybody else on Palm Sunday but we did eventually get to join the church. And I thought, “Well, there's something to this religion. I'm gonna go check this stuff out.” And that's why I went and got a theological degree.

*Cameron Norman:* You mentioned at this time, how did you balance your education and participate in these marches and events?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Oh, I got my lesson. But back then, you know, when the sanitation workers were being treated so bad and Dr. King came here – You know, that was stuff you did in the evening. One of the things a guy named James Bevel that worked with Dr. King did – He would come around to the high schools in the evening because our parents were working, right? So he used young people from BTW, Hamilton and we went down and marched in front of Goldsmith's when they called for the outage to stop buying stuff and everything as a part of our protests.

[0:35:00]

He would come around to the high schools and pick us up and take us downtown and that's where we would march in the evenings after school because our parents were working.

*Cameron Norman:* Would you say that the Civil Rights Movement and the NAACP has helped this community?

*Cheryl Cotton:* I think at that time it did. I think at that time. It galvanized us. Not all African Americans were in on it. Not all African

Americans were all in as they say. But the ones that were, that movement galvanized us. Made us realize that there is strength in numbers. And if your cause is right and God is on your side, you're gonna be able to effect change. And I think that's what happened. I think we're so discombobulated now as communities that we don't have that here in the Memphis area as such.

[0:36:00]

*Cameron Norman:* We read an article that you received an award from the NAACP. What was it for?

*Cheryl Cotton:* I became Ms. Social Belle for raising the \$3,000. And my Dad always worked two jobs and one of his jobs was working at Justine's, which at that time was a very – You know, a four star, five star restaurant here. And so Dad waited on people in the evening like *Brodnax Jewelry*, the Goldsmiths, the *Levys* – all of the rich people in town. He worked for those people. Well, he went to them and asked them for donations. And I'll never forget. I had the flu. And before the contest ended, Dad picked me up at BTW and we went and picked up checks all over town and I ended up with \$3,000. So I won what's called the Miss Social Belle. And by the way when I got to Pittsburgh and got a good friend she'd go, "This is Cheryl and she's Miss Social Belle but she doesn't ring very well up here in the North."

[0:37:00]

So in raising the \$3000, it allowed me to get a free trip to Los Angeles to the National NAACP Convention. That was my prize for winning.

*Cameron Norman:* So what all did your father participate in?

*Cheryl Cotton:* He participated in everything. He was named the head of the Tennessee Council on Human Relations. I think I've got an article about Dad being – Well, this is when my Dad died. This is a commercial appeal. Devoted activist Fanion, that's my maiden name, dies at 79. He served as a foot soldier in the Civil Rights Movement and this was July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010. So I brought that to show. I couldn't find the article that they did on April 4<sup>th</sup> when he said – "When I had legs, I made it count. When I could walk, I made it count."

[0:38:00]

OR Who was your Mom?

*Cheryl Cotton:* My Mom, after raising five kids, she went to Russ College everyday. And by the way, we had an old raggedy station wagon and they had speed traps on 78. This is before 78 was the big highway it is now. And so invariably, Dad and I – Dad would put the whole family, Mom and Grandmom, and we would go down to Holly Springs and get my Mom outta jail. And they didn't really put them in jail. They restrained them. Put them in a room. But they took their jewelry. And they took their purses. And we would have to go down and pay the bond to get Mama out of jail. "Mom, you went to jail? Really?" She was just retained. They kept them back, you know?

*Cameron Norman:* Did your father participate in the sanitation strike?

*Cheryl Cotton:* He participated in the whole movement.

*Cameron Norman:* He did?

*Cheryl Cotton:* The whole movement. We were there from the beginning to the end.

[0:39:00]

Our minister was one that pretty much did it and Maxine was his best friend. Dr. Smith, she was married to a dentist, and they were born on August 24<sup>th</sup>. So Dad and Dr. Smith always celebrated their birthday, usually in our backyard because my Dad was a big cook – big barbeque guy.

*Cameron Norman:* What are the assets and the deficits from your time growing up versus the assets and deficits of our time? Do you think things are the same or have they changed?

*Cheryl Cotton:* I think things are a little bit different. I think the asset was that we grew up in a segregated community and we had to depend on each other. And that makes a big difference. So we could stand in our centers unmoved and let all the problems in the city – You know, we didn't have the gun violence that we have today. And you know that just makes me cry so hard on the inside. You know, when I see all the gun violence here and I thought.

[0:40:00]

You know, we didn't pick up a gun every time we couldn't get along with somebody or somebody said something that we didn't like. So that was one of our assets and the other part was?

*Cameron Norman:* Deficits.

*Cheryl Cotton:* Deficits. We were limited in terms of where we could go and what we could do. I'm old enough to remember going in the drugstores and having to drink out the "Colored Only" water fountain. You know, it said, "Colored." Now this was right down here at Belleview and Macklemore. I remember that. There were some things that held us back but the great thing is, we were all together as a community.

Churches were central to what we did. Everybody was granted in some kind of faith situation in their lives. I think that made a difference. You know, I go to funerals now with young people and young people are dressed like this, which tells me they don't have church clothes. Which, I'm not saying you have to have church clothes 'cause God doesn't care. But, you know, we always had church clothes.

[0:41:00]

*Cameron Norman:* You've come a long way to overcome cancer and traveled a lot of places – What advice do you give to children like us who are struggling and going through things in our time?

*Cheryl Cotton:* I would say – I can sum it up in a sentence. Plan your work and work your plan. Plan your work. Have a goal. Now some of the things that happened to me, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. For example, with the college, I went to Africa. But because I had a current visa and a passport, when the opportunity – They needed a black student to go to the World Student Christian Federation – In fact, I helped to start the United Methodist Church and I don't say that for self-aggrandizement. But Reverend Lawson – The United Methodist churches – You've seen United Methodist Churches around the city?

[0:42:00]

In 1968, I think somewhere in between '68 and '69, as black people we were Methodists Episcopal. Okay. How we become United Methodists was there was a denomination called United Brethren and there were Methodists. The white people belonged to the Methodist church of the South. Blacks were M.E.s. The

church in Charleston, African Methodist Episcopal, A.M.E. – So there was a time when all blacks belonged to, if you were in the Methodist Church, you belonged.

Well, they had a big conference that meets every four years and they decided to merge. What Reverend Lawson did for me that helped me. He nominated me to be on a committee of 50 people and we oversaw the merger of the United Methodist Church. A guy, that I love, named Dr. Cain Hope Felder, great professor up at Howard University, opened an organization in Atlanta called Black Methodists for Church Renewal.

[0:43:00]

So when I got on the committee of 50, I traveled the United States. They put me on the Bible Study Committee. That's how I ended up in New York at the Today Show place doing the taping. And they had me and a lot of distinguished people and that's how I ended up being on the broadcast. Because the American Bible Society, because of Dr. King, our focus when the United Methodist Church started, was on the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5-7.

As a member of this committee of 50, we would meet every 3 months. I was at Pitt. They'd send me a ticket. Send me an itinerary to get on the plane and be in San Francisco. The bible study, the finance – I can't remember what they called it – I was on that. They distributed all the money.

[0:44:00]

But while I was on this big committee that oversaw the merger and I was there for four years. It was called the Quadrennial Emphasis Committee of the United Methodist Church. And we were the ones that were responsible for the United Methodist Church as you see it today.

So that's how I got to New York to be on the program 'cause the American Bible Society, they did all of our literature. Adult, Sunday school, for kids – We got with them and they took care of all of the media that would be going out into the churches. I'm a big kahuna now. Especially when I get \_\_\_\_\_ on a beach. Which we can all leave today and go in my car... *(Laughter)* Oh guys, if I could we'd leave right out of this building right now just with the little money I've got and we'd have a great time. I promise you.

[0:45:00]

*Obdieah Robinson:* What do you think the best thing is about South Memphis?

*Cheryl Cotton:* The best thing about South Memphis – It’s changed. You know it’s blighted now, right? Our communities are blighted. We’ve got drugs, gangs, houses – You know, Hamilton, right? A lot of communities. I’d love to see this community come back. Because it was a great community. And everybody outta love – there outta be something that you can love about South Memphis.

And I loved South Memphis because it helped **Jackie Scruggs** to become that she is. And you guys are gonna go out and we’re gonna see you one day. There is something that God has purposed for your life that only you can do; nobody else will be able to do it. And I won’t be here to see it but hey – Rock it when you get a chance. Okay?

*Obdieah Robinson:* What do you think would make South Memphis a better place?

[0:46:00]

*Cheryl Cotton:* I think we need out city government and our county governments to care about the people. I go all over the city of Memphis. I’ve got a sister that lives in **Cayouville**. One that lives in Cordova. And sometimes we don’t care about the poor and the disenfranchised like we do. We get looked over. When I used to go to my cancer treatments. I lived then off of Riverdale. I’d come Riverdale to Stout, take Stout over to Germantown Parkway. Beautiful streets. Putting up red lights.

You know, we don’t care – I can say this, this is my opinion. Please don’t quote me. But my experience has shown me that sometime people don’t care about the poor. They really don’t. And I was poor but I didn’t know it until Walter Cronkite came on the TV and told me I was poor. And I said, “What is he talking about? I got skates. I got a bicycle. I can go to the zoo. Is he talking about me?” Yeah, he was. It was all about me and my four siblings.

[0:47:00]

*Obdieah Robinson:* \_\_\_\_\_.

*Cheryl Cotton:* Say that again Obdieah? It’s okay. Take your time baby.

*Obdieah Robinson:* What is a new renovation in South Memphis like \_\_\_\_\_ you helpful about the future of South Memphis?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Am I optimistic about the future of South Memphis? I think eventually, this is gonna change. You know, *Stax* is here. Renaissance Center. By the way, this is the kind of work that my ex husband does. He is a grant writer for Russ College and what happened with the historically black colleges and universities – They gave them money. I think it came from HUD. I’m not sure. But the reason you got this sitting over here right now is because over at LaMoyne College there is a Director of the Community Development Foundation and they gave HBCU’s, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to build up the neighborhood around the colleges.

[0:48:00]

So like down there at Russ with my ex husband when I was teaching 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade to kids who go, “Ms. Cotton, HUD is giving me and my Mama a new house. I want \_\_\_\_\_ to get Ms. Cotton a new house.” (*Laughter*)

*Cameron Norman:* Do you have any memory of your life in South Memphis that you could share?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Yeah. I grew up. My grandmother ran a laundry right over here on this south street. What would that be Jack? Porter. And so, on Saturday evenings my Mom or Dad would bring the kids down here and we’d help Grandmamma close up the laundry and there was a grocery store right there. And so, she kept us to make sure we went to Sunday school every Sunday and she gave my Mom and Dad a break. So that was a highlight in our week.

[0:49:00]

That we were gonna stay at my Grandmother’s so we could go to church and so we went to Sunday school every day. So I think just having constance. Things that don’t move. Things that you can count on. They make a difference in a young person’s life. And I think that’s not as glued together as it should be in current life. So it was a great thing because you knew people. Do you know every neighbor on your street? Do you? Everybody knows everybody on your street? Do you speak to everybody on your street?

*Obdieah Robinson:* I try to.

*Cheryl Cotton:* See we knew everybody. Every house on our street, we knew somebody. You know and that makes a difference. You feel like you belong to something. And I wonder if the babies today can say in their communities, “I feel like this is my community. And it’s a great community.” Now, we weren’t saying that back then because we didn’t have enough sense to say that. You know what I’m saying? You’re looking in retrospect. You’re looking back and saying, that’s how it was.

[0:50:00]

And I was just like you when I was growing up. No different. You probably wear better shoes and stuff than I did and stuff. You know, we were *Payless* every day because Mom could get, four girls and a boy, Mom get *Payless* shoes for two for five dollars. So for ten dollars, we had our Easter shoes and you couldn’t tell us anything. Put that Vaseline on that cheap cloth to \_\_\_\_\_. We never realized kids. We were just like all are livin’.

*Obdieah Robinson:* How would you compare race relationship in Memphis then and now?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Well, we were pretty afraid. You know, when you look at the police stuff now. You know, we didn’t do anything wrong because I can remember the police getting out at my corner – I lived on a corner – So I saw guys get beat up with billy clubs and stuff. So, they kind of had us in check.

[0:51:00]

Now, people a lot bolder – Raping 80-year-old women. Come on. Doing the stuff that we’re doing now. Come on. That was just – nobody would have imagined that humans would engage in that kind of behavior.

*Cameron Norman:* Would you say that some thing are repeating themselves or have gotten worse?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Wouldn’t you agree? We don’t want to hear that report everyday of somebody being killed here. You know. Chicago had 47 incidents. 33 shootings and 7 deaths in a weekend. July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. That’s not us. But if we don’t stop it, we’re gonna catch up with them. I think your Mom outta feel safe going to the Walgreens. You know? But we can’t do that. I think our communities were safer back then in South Memphis than they are today.

[0:52:00]

*Obdieah Robinson:* When the man here killed nine people \_\_\_\_\_, how did you feel about this?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Well, I love young people. And as a Special Ed teacher I learned about all disabilities. And I think the young man had some serious personal problems. 21 years old. What are you supposed to be doing at 21 years old? What do you hope to be doing at 21 years of age?

*Cameron Norman:* In college. Spain.

*Cheryl Cotton:* In college. Why wasn't he in college? He dropped out in the ninth grade. Yeah he did. Did you all read that? I think he dropped out – Don't go and try and do things. Stay in your lane. He really got out of his lane. But that said to me that there was a boy. That child belongs to God just like all of us. He made a very bad choice and they're gonna be severe consequences. But when I looked in his little face – I looked in his little face just like I look in yours – With compassion. I don't hate him and I understand why those Christians came out with that forgiveness thing at the very beginning.

[0:53:00]

Because, you know, he made bad choices. He made a bad choice. But what influenced him? There had to be a void in that child's life. Where were the parents? What was he involved in? Sometimes, you know, we just get out of our lane. That kid should have been in college, should have had a girlfriend, things that you do at 21 years old. He should have been excited about starting a new life. I feel sorry for him that so much was missing in that kid's life that he had to resort to filling up his life with something that had to do with hate. Because God is love, yes?

*Cameron Norman:* Yes.

*Cheryl Cotton:* Everyday! Amen. Pass the basket. Yes sir.

*Cameron Norman:* Is there anything that we have not elaborated about that you would like to add?

*Cheryl Cotton:* When I was thinking about this, I was thinking about – I'd like to ask you, how do you feel about your life today?

[0:54:00]

About where you are? Do you have goals? Do you have objectives? Are you mad about anything? Where do you plan to go from here? You know Dr. King wrote that great book *Where Do We Go From Here* and so I ask you all, where do we go from here? What have you gotten out of this program this year? These people that have given their time to work with you? How do you feel about that whole experience? How has it helped you? When I look at your generation, where are you? What do you care about?

What's important to you? Is it just this? Really? I finished college without a phone, without a computer. I didn't have any of that. I never even had a car. Dad was selling cars down here and folks would come to me, "Cheryl, you're Daddy off my heels and put me in some wheels." (*Laughter*) Congratulations. I'm walking to school every day in the snow.

[0:55:00]

And I look like a walrus when that 13 degrees makes my nose run and it freezes on my pants. How about that?

*Obdieah Robinson:* Do you any advice you want to give to young people in South Memphis?

*Cheryl Cotton:* Get centered. Find you a center in your life. You may not understand. It takes some time to chew on that. But stand in your center unmoved with your goals and objectives. I've got a plan. I'm gonna plan my work and work my plan. Guys. Real deal holy feel. Everything is about reading. The better reader you are, the better you are gonna do in school. The better reader you are, the better you are gonna do in your college programs. Don't go to college just 'cause Dad and teachers and everything say, "Oh, I gotta go to college." Know what you want. You are buying a product. It's like going into *Macy's*.

[0:56:00]

Or going into *Hibbett Sports*. You know you want a certain pair of shoes. Don't go and get that college degree and you don't know really what you want to do with that college degree. You are buying a product. You go to Southwest and you major in basket weaving. Anybody looking for basket weavers right now? So know where that college degree – You are gonna feel a lot better. I used to tell parents, "Wait 'til that kid really knows what he wants

to do.”

I changed my major two or three times. You’re gonna do the same thing when you go to college. Oh I thought I wanted to be a teacher. But now I want to be an anesthesiologist. Or now I wanna be a flobotomist. Read. Look in the paper. See what the jobs are. Go to Monster.com and see what they are looking for. And then you go get that degree in that, so that you can be successful. Someone offer you to go to Seaside.

*Cameron Norman:* We are so grateful to have you. You shared so many stories. And hopefully it has inspired us to do our best and go to places where we didn’t think we could go.

[0:57:00]

Thank you for participating in Crossroads to Freedom Project.

*Cheryl Cotton:* Can I read my little thing now? My little scripture? Listen. And this is from a lady I’ve never met and she sends me this every morning between 8:00 and 8:30. I guess when she gets to work. And it says, let me pull it up so I make sure I get everything that she said. She said, woo-hoo. Woo-hoo. Oh god, can I find it? It’s so cool, what the lady sent me this morning. I’m not good with these things. Here we go. And it comes from 870-8052. Let’s read, this lady, “The Lord will guide you always,” it’s from Isaiah 58:11. “Where God guides, he provides.” And she doesn’t have who wrote that. She puts her initials DJB.

[0:58:00]

But for today, at 9:34, she wrote, “Success often comes to those who dare to act. It seldom goes to the timid who are afraid of the consequences.” And this was a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru. “Success often comes to those who dare to act. It seldom goes to the timid who ever afraid of the consequences.” Go. Be. Do. That’s what Ms. Cotton got for you today. Go. Be. Do. Go where you need to go. Do what you need to do. And be the people who God called you to be

[End of Audio]