[00:00:00]

Holly James: On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project I'd like to thank you for being here with us.

Jane Walters: It's nice to be here~~meet you~~.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt* Okay. Can we first start will you state your name and your occupation?

Jane Walters: My name is Jane Walters, and I am the principal of a Memphis City school, high school, Grizzlies Academy.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt* Okay. Where were you born and raised?

Jane Walters: I was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and I was there until I was a small child and then came to Memphis ~~to~~ and went to Memphis City Schools.~~ city~~.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt* Okay. What are the names of your parents?

Jane Walters: My father was Arthur C Walters. He was born in Pittsburg, and my mother was Wilma Zacharias Walters, and she was born in Pittsburg.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt* Okay. And what are their occupations?

Jane Walters: My father was a salesman. My mother did not work. She was a housewife.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt* Okay. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Jane Walters: I have one brother a year younger. He's Arthur J Walters, and he spent his life in the industrial electricity business, ran the department at Tri-State _____ in Memphis.

[00:01:14]

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt* Okay. What was your home life like?

Jane Walters: It was 1930s World War II home. My father was just old enough not to be drafted to World War II, which disappointed him a lot because patriotism was a big deal then, and he thought it was his duty to go to war. I had an uncle in World War II who lived to return. He was stationed in France most of the war, and after the war – I was in elementary school during the war, and

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then I went to high school. I went to Rhodes College, which was in southwestern Memphis. I was in the class of '56 at Rhodes.

[00:02:10]

Dara Chesnutt: Okay. What kind of activities were you involved in as a child?

Jane Walters: Well, my mother played the organ in church, and so we were in church a lot, and I grew up next to an organ bench. ~~I~~ Mouthing lyrics to tenors with faulty memories. I took piano lessons. I was a music major at Rhodes. I had children's choirs from the time I was 15, and I had ~~-~~little bits in church choirs. So, I was either in school or at home or at church ~~and I~~ ~~.~~ninety percent of the time.

Dara Chesnutt: Okay. Where did you go for elementary school?

Jane Walters: Vo~~l~~l~~al~~entine.

Dara Chesnutt: Okay. And then where did you go for junior high –

Jane Walters: ~~-~~Snowden and C~~-c~~entral.

[00:03:00]

Holly James: So at what point did you move from Pittsburg to Memphis?

Jane Walters: I can't remember the exact year, but I started first grade at Vo~~l~~l~~Val~~entine, so we were in Memphis by the time I was six, and that was right before Pearl Harbor.

Dara Chesnutt: Okay. And you mentioned your mom playing the organ. I guess church played a big role in your –

Jane Walters: Yes. Yes. I grew up in the church. My mother, as I said, was a church organist. She played the organ, and when I got a little bit older in college I directed the choir for a while and that sort of thing. My mother was very talented, so was my dad. My dad used to play in jazz bands when he was young. They both had a good ear. I had a good education. There's a difference.

Dara Chesnutt: What made you decide to go to Rhodes College after high school?

[00:03:55]

Jane Walters: Well, I could not afford to go away to school. We didn't have the money for me to go away, and my brother was just a year behind me, so it would be two of us in school at the same time, and I did

not want to go to a school that I didn't think was academically rigorous, and Southwestern had a very good reputation. It was also Presbyterian, and I had grown up in the Presbyterian Church, and when we first came to Memphis we went to Evergreen, which was right across the street. So, I knew about it. I got a good education there. It was a good experience.

I did sort of a double major. I did some music and I did music history, and literature, and then I also decided I wanted the Bachelor of Arts degree as well as a Bachelor of Music degree, and at that time they had about 72 semester hours of required liberal arts before you started your major.

[00:05:07]

Jane Walters: So, I said – I graduated from Rhodes knowing everything ~~but~~ except the meaning of the word elective.

~~*Jane Walters:*~~ Video Cut: 05:19

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Dara Chesnutt: *(Laughter)* Do you have any other significant memories from your time at Rhodes?

Jane Walters: Well, it was a good time. I mean, I was working part time. I wasn't living on campus. I couldn't afford to, and I had jobs, and I had church choirs, and I had little bits in church choirs, and you don't go late to choir rehearsal when you have little ones. And it just seemed– it's all sort of a blur when I go back to it. It seems very different to me when I see now young people over there and some of the loads they are not taking and some are.

[00:06:06]

Jane Walters: It just seems like a very different place in many ways, but I'm grateful to Rhodes. I got an education there. They were good to me. They gave me scholarship money when I needed it.

Holly James: Going back to more of your childhood, I know you were young when you came to Memphis, but do you remember the difference in race and rules in society between the North and the South?

Jane Walters: Oh yes. I remember it very clearly because when we moved to Memphis my mother's mother came with us, and she had been born in Ohio, but her family had come to this country –~~s~~he was one of the – I don't know – maybe the second or third child born in this country because her people were Welsh. And they had come

from Wales, and they did not know anything about segregation of any kind.

[00:07:10]

Jane Walters: And when we first came to Memphis my mother very quickly found out that if you were going to have anyone help you in the house, and she had two little children, that it was going to be someone black. And we had a very nice lady, and the neighbor's wife explained to my mother – there were no dryers then. There were no washers and dryers. There were washers and there were no dryers. They explained to my mother that white women didn't hang clothes on the line; that it was all right to do your own washing, but you had to ask "the girl" to hang them on the line.

And my mother was a rather meek person, and she came in and told my grandmother that, and my grandmother, who was not meek, grabbed a basket of clothes, went out and said, "I'll show them who hangs clothes on the line." And she did. And within a few weeks all the ~~white~~ women on the block were hanging clothes on the line. I mean, it was just so silly. It didn't make sense. It was just ridiculous. They had so many rules.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Holly James:* Do you remember any experiences similar to that growing up when you were elementary or even high school where race played a factor in your life?

Jane Walters: Well, we were so segregated in the south that it was very different. My mother had a harder time than I did because southern – they were still fighting the Civil War, literally.

[00:09:05]

Jane Walters: And the fact that you were from the North; even in the church there was prejudice. I think my mother would have had an easier time had she been more aggressive, but she was very, very, very, very shy, and I think it was harder on her.

My father got along better, but I think in the end they tended to deal somewhat more straightforwardly with each other. It took a long time. We went to all-white schools, and we did not know that there was anything else. We really did not know. My parents knew, and one of the things in particular I said to my mother was that her best friend growing up was black, and they had grown up going to each other's homes and that sort of thing.

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[00:10:12]

Jane Walters: My mother's father was very ill and died when she was 16. He'd been ill a long time, so they did not make a lot of money.~~,~~

Video Cut: 10:24

Jane Walters: B~~b~~ut her best friend's father was a ~~man~~, Pullman Porter, which at that time was considered a good job for a black man. Of course it was a regular job, and I'm sure he was gracious to people, so I'm sure he got money in tips as well as salary, and it was considered honorable work, and they had a lot more money than my mom's family did.

They had a piano, and my mother could play by ear by the time she was five, six years old.

[00:10:58]

Jane Walters: Her friend would have her come down so she could play the piano. My mother remembered that she was always grateful for that. That's the other reason she could not understand what everybody in the South was in a wad about.

It was just – they were literally still wounds from the civil war, and it would have been about eight years.

Holly James: So did race play a factor in college as well? Was the college still segregated at that point?

Jane Walters: The college was totally segregated, but we were taught – I will say this. We were taught, and I'm quite sure whenever we had guests there that were black I'm quite sure they knew exactly what was going on because they were beautifully treated because we were so sensitive about being racial or being racist. We were taught better in college, but it was still a segregated school.

[00:12:16]

Jane Walters: But every big school in the South was segregated. That was why there was a strong cadre of all-black colleges that developed like LeMoyne-Owen, like Fisk in Nashville. Those colleges were developed simply because there was no alternative. The state colleges were segregated in the _____. Segregation was the law of the land.

Holly James: So, at what point in your life were you when desegregation started taking place in the South?

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Jane Walters: Actually, I was out of college. I taught in a Memphis City school beginning in 1956. It was an all-white school. I know until at least '62, '63 something like that, and then the integration was very, very token; 1956~~4~~ was the Brown Decision, and the Brown Decision ordered integration with all deliberate speed I believe was the phrase. I could be mistaken about that. Well, it was certainly deliberate, but there wasn't much speed, and every advance that was made black leaders had to fight for, go to court for, deal with another situation before they could really enjoy the rights that were clearly theirs.

[00:14:18]

Holly James: So, how do you feel your role in the school at that time when the integration began affected the way – 'cause you said you were taught to be racially sensitive in college. Do you think that affected the way you handled the situation?

Jane Walters: Well, I don't know. I don't remember having – once you've had black and white children together in school you learn something that's very, very profound. Kids are kids, okay. A 13-year-old girl is a fool no matter what color she is. She's 13. She wants to be 18, and she acts like 6 sometimes.

[00:15:04]

Jane Walters: It don't matter what color it is. Boys, a 17-year-old boy is a fool, and I don't care what color he is. He wants to drive ~~fast~~ cars fast and spend money and date girls. There's not a difference.

I tell you, I was being pushed when I was the principal of the school. I was being pushed because there was some black and white na-na-na-na going on.

Video Cut: 15:36

~~*Jane Walters:*~~ I had a lot of kids. It was a big school. It was _____ in the early days, and I had to think of something. You had to come up with something that kids could get their fingers around.

[00:15:56]

Jane Walters: Now, the one thing that kids want from the time they're about 13 or 14 until they're through high school, the thing they really want is their own car. That is – that is happiness. That is fulfillment. That

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is success. Your own car. Every kid can relate to their own car.

So, I used to tell them – and I'd have them sitting in a gym. I'd say, "Okay, close your eyes. Now, your parents – let's pretend your parents have saved up and really worked hard, and they've got the money to get you a car for your birthday. I don't mean just a car. I mean, the car. Can you see it?" Yes. They're just grooving on it. That's the only thing I can say on tape. At any rate, they are, "Oh yeah." They can see it. You can see them going "Mm-hmm we can see it."

[00:17:13]

Jane Walters: I said, "Okay, the morning of your birthday you get up, and they are so proud of this, and they blindfold you. And they walk you out the doors, and they take the blindfold off. There is the car. They have gone to~~hrough~~ so much trouble. They went to the florist, and you know that big, wide ribbon you get at the florist and got this big wide ribbon, and they've got this huge blue bow sitting on the car. There it is, the car with this big blue bow on it. And you look at them and say, 'I wanted one with a red bow.'"

[00:18:08]

Jane Walters: This is when you lose the kids. They're like, "Lady, it's the car. You can take the stinking bow off. Don't you get it?" They're looking at me like, "Whoa, this one is alive. She does not get it." "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I'm a fool. You're thinking you can take the bow off." The kids go, "Yeah, yeah." I said, "The bow's just gift wrap, isn't it?" "Yeah, yeah."

"Skin is gift wrap. The present is inside." I have told two generations of children that, and it still resonates with them. My kids now if you say, "What is race?" they'll say, "Gift wrap," and it is. It's gift wrap.

[00:19:09]

Jane Walters: If you ask a surgeon if he goes~~was~~ in an operating room to cut someone open and he is a very, very, very, very fine surgeon who is much in demand he doesn't do a lot of the opening and closing, okay. He does a lot of the hard work. So, he goes in and everything is covered except the part he is supposed to do. He might not even know what color the person is under the sheet, because once you cut people open~~.~~ So, the present is inside, and that's the only way I've ever been able to explain it to children in a

way I thought they not only understood, and it does not erase all of their feelings of racism.

[00:20:06]

Jane Walters: It does not, but it does help them to understand that you can't judge a person by the color of their skin.

Video Cut: 20:18

Jane Walters: That's so important that people understand. When you look at a person and judge that person purely on the color of their skin to me that is wicked. That is evil. Now, if you meet the person and the person happens to be someone that is not the same color as you are and they turn out to be a bad person, that happens. But we have equal opportunity thugs around everywhere.

[00:21:03]

Jane Walters: We have equal opportunity thieves. We have equal opportunity liars. So, you can't make decisions about a person's personality because of your friend.

Holly James: Well, it seems like a point that might have gotten across to the students very well, but did you feel a lot of grievances from the parents during this time or a lot of pressure from the older generation in the schools?

Jane Walters: Not particularly. The – in the first place, when all this happened, parents were not babysitting teenagers as much as they are now. Right now we have this thing about being involved in your child's life. I don't mean you shouldn't pay attention to your child, but if your child can't have a little bit of chance to make their own mistakes they're going to be making them when they're 40.

[00:22:07]

Jane Walters: Better to act the fool when you still have an excuse. People are not tolerant of women and men 35 years old doing stupid stuff, but they'll kind of give you a pass when you're 15 or 16 like, "Ugh. They'll get over it." Most of them do.

So, I don't recall any parent ever making a big issue of it. I really don't. If they had wanted to maybe they thought better of it because I clearly wasn't making it an issue. I do not mean that I have not made mistakes. I do not try to give that impression because it was very difficult to know what to do at a time when

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you were afraid that every word out of your mouth might be misunderstood.

[00:23:05]

Jane Walters: I'm a lot more likely to just be real straight with black parents today than I would have been in 1967 because everybody's nerves were on edge about it in the South. I'm going to tell you – if you want me to tell you I have not made mistakes I cannot. I've made more than I care to think about, and you hurt people sometimes and you don't even know you've hurt them. That just happens. I don't mean you shouldn't try to avoid it you're going to make some mistakes. I made some bloopers.

Holly James: Do you have any significant memories of Memphis during the time you were teaching and especially in the '60s?

[00:24:09]

Jane Walters: Well, the '60s was Vietnam, and I'll tell you one of the things I remember, it has nothing to do with race. It was LSD. I've dealt with drugs in schools a long time, but I've never dealt with anything as bad as LSD when it came back from Vietnam in the '60s. A flash wave of kids – when the kids had a bad trip it was very scary. I got to the place where I couldn't say this to anybody, but I was so relieved if they were just doing pot. And I don't mean I thought they should have been doing any kind of drug because there's no drug that's going to be helpful, but when I saw what happened to kids who were having flashbacks and things like that because of some of the drugs they were taking quite a lot of it was LSD.

[00:25:17]

Jane Walters: It was scary. That's the scariest time I've ever had with drugs.

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~~*Jane Walters:*~~ And it was – society wasn't ready for it. It just hit. There were not a lot of places to get kids in programs and stuff like that. It was scary. I don't make any bones about that~~think~~. I don't want to do that. I don't want to do the '60s over again.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Holly James:* So, is that a lot of what inspired you to stay in the city school system is just the attachment with the children?

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Jane Walters: I don't know how to say this, but I never needed to be inspired. From the time I was six year-s old I knew I would teach, and I had jobs where people would try to talk to me about doing something else. I had a man tell my father – I worked for him, and he told my father, "I hate to see her end up an ordinary school teacher." My dad said, "You can talk to her, but it won't do any good." He said that to me. He said, "I really can't tell you how it bothers me to think you will turn out to be an ordinary school teacher." I remembered what I said. I said, "I'm not going to be an ordinary school teacher."

[00:27:02]

Jane Walters: But I always knew I loved it. I did it one way or another for over 50 years. If I had it to do over, I would do it again. It's been a priveledge. When people trust you with their children, that's all they've got. A lot of people trust you with their money. They don't send us their used cars. They send us their children.

I had a professor at Duke one time that said, "They don't keep the good ones at home. They send you the best they got when it comes to kids. They're not trying to ~~street~~ mistreat you by sending you the second-rate ones. They're sending you the best they got," and everyone is someone's child. People think that's just sentimental hogwash, but it isn't. They're all somebody's child.

[00:28:11]

Jane Walters: And you agree to be responsible for that child, and you should take that seriously. That's why I get nuts when people say, "Well, of course, I don't know what Bitsy's going to do when she gets through college, but she can always teach." Can she now? Hmm. My wish for Bitsy is she would find a rich man and never work anywhere. Works for me.

[00:28:42]

Jane Walters: Whenever I talk to young college students about teaching, and I always begin the same way, and I think it's right. I say, "If you can do anything else, please go do it." What I mean by that is if you can allow yourself to do anything else, go do it. We have enough teachers who are teaching because the hours are nice they think and they're off for the summer and you can do other things, but if you are doing what you need to do, it consumes you. That doesn't mean you can't have a family or you can't have any other life. It does mean you have to be dedicated to those children. You owe it to them.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Holly James:* So, did you go outside the classroom at all? Were you involved in the community and other organizations?

Jane Walters: Well, when I was young there were a few things. ~~I don't know~~I'm a little vague about what they all were. I had some – a church and school. Church and school.

[00:30:07]

Jane Walters: Church and school most of the time. Church groups and that sort of thing. I was – I knew I wanted to get a doctorate, and at the risk of sounding unfortunate, I did not want to get it in straight education. I just didn't think that's what I wanted to do. So, Duke University had a very fine school of education, and they had an agreement with the law school at Duke where you could get a degree and spend a great deal of your time in law school and ~~use~~ you had access to the law library. There was a very fine education professor there whose interest was the school of law. That's what I did. I went to Duke for my doctorate.

[00:31:02]

Jane Walters: And I was at Duke when Dr. King was killed. I was doing my residency at Duke that year.

Video Cut: 31:08

Jane Walters: ~~,~~ A~~a~~nd the minute I heard it I tried to call home. All the lines were blocked in and out of Memphis. Couldn't call home. ~~*[Inaudible comment]*~~You couldn't get a call through for about forty-eight hours to Memphis. And, –certainly from a college campus now I'm sure there are plenty of people getting calls through from different businesses and things like that, but it was a horrible time for Memphis.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Holly James:* So, did you notice a large change in the city from before you left for Duke and then after you returned?

Jane Walters: There was – it was an interesting time to be at Duke because Duke was having a lot of civil rights struggles at the same time. It was very hard. I would say from '67 until we finally got the schools more or less integrated it was very ~~_____.~~ hard. ~~*[Inaudible comment]*~~

[00:32:18]

Jane Walters: And after I got my degree I worked at the school system for three years scheduling schools. Schools were still segregated. I'm sorry.

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It was '71, '72 and they were still segregated, and one of the high schools was being picketed by people, by a group of young black men who were opposed to the segregation, opposed to a lot of things. And the school was having difficulty getting its schedule together.

[00:33:05]

Jane Walters: So they sent me down there to schedule the school. I could have been closer to another white woman on ~~[illegible]~~, the Figi Islands, okay. And I did not know – when you go in the school to fix it you can't expect to be greeted with open arms. I don't know how to say this tactfully, but I can tell you what I had on that day. Because it was late August, it was the kind of weather in Memphis that takes all the threat out of hell, and I had on a dress that was made of the material of the hour, which was a knit polyester. Polyester doesn't breathe, so I was soaked underneath. I was literally soaked I was perspiring so badly.

Pickets were up there. School was on a street that runs like this, and there's a street that runs into it. There was no parking areas, and I had to park all the way down the street. There were little homes, very modest, very neat little homes all the way up the street. On every porch there was a grandma, older black woman sitting on the porch~~[illegible]~~. I walked up the street, and I said good morning to every grandma, and every grandma said good morning, and sometimes before you could say it they said it first.

[00:35:06]

Jane Walters: I spoke to every grandma. Then I crossed the street. The pickets backed up to let me through.

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~~*Jane Walters:*~~ They were not afraid of the police. They were scared ~~of that line~~out of their minds of those grandmas. Show me the good grandma and I tell you she is not messing. So, they just backed up and let me go in.

And there were two guidance counselors there, black women, who had they been allowed could have scheduled the school, but there was a lot of to-do about who was supposed to be in charge of this, that and the other. We sat on the floor together and ate crackers and bologna on the floor at lunch and scheduled that school.

[00:36:02]

Jane Walters: And there were two buildings in the school, and the only time I thought I might have overplayed my hand – if you're scheduling a school you've got to know how many rooms you've got and where they are and everything. I had had a couple people tell me two different numbers of the numbers of rooms on the top floor of this back building. So, at lunch one day I just went over there, and everybody was at lunch in that building, which I really didn't know. It was empty, but it was open. So, I went up to count the rooms. I'm almost through, and I'm coming this way, and this great big kid, probably 6'2", big guy like high school football player, dark-skinned kids walking toward me. I thought, "Hmm, you may have overplayed your hand here. You are by yourself."

I kept walking toward him, and he kept walking toward me, and when he got about as far from me as I am from you he looked at me and said, "Are you lost?"

[00:37:04]

Jane Walters: I said, "No, son. I'm not lost. I'm trying to count these rooms because I'm trying to get this schedule finished." He said, "Are you almost through?" I said, "Yes. I've just about got it." He said, "Okay. Let me stay with you until you finish, and then I'm going to walk you back to the other building." He said, "Don't come over here by yourself at lunch like this. It's not smart." I said, "Okay, I appreciate that."

So, maybe if I'd ever been mistreated maybe I wouldn't feel the way I did, but I was never mistreated. And it's just people should not be judged by the color of their skin. I thought about that the first time I heard Maya Angelo read her poem _____.

Holly James: ~~*[Inaudible comment]*~~

[00:38:13]

Jane Walters: No. Except it's a shame that now Memphis City Schools is as segregated as it was in the first place because everyone has run just about that can afford to run, and we are now dealing with a population of middle class, lower middle class and poverty black children who need all the help they can get.

I think the hardest time I had with it was the fact that the first segregated schools that opened, opened in churches, and I have a hard time when people profess to be deeply religious and make that judgment.

[00:39:05]

Jane Walters: Maybe that's a personal thing, and I haven't changed my mind. I thought it was wicked. And some of those schools still exist. Memphis City Schools is now as segregated as it was when we started.

So, when my children were here are behind a year or so because we do four years in three, and I have one white child and the rest are all black. And, ~~am~~ they're good kids. They're mannerly. They have checkered backgrounds in schools, but they're going to graduate and graduate in _____. They're nice children. Their parents are unbelievably cooperative.

Video Cut: 40:03

Jane Walters: Their parents do not seem to hold it against me that I'm white.

[00:40:11]

Jane Walters: And I certainly don't hold it against them that they're black because neither of us had any control over it. It's an accident of birth.

~~*Holly James:*~~ *Dara Chesnutt:* Thank you so much.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Holly James:* If you had one piece of advice for people in my generation what would it be?

Jane Walters: Well, your generation with the kind of kids you're around and the kind of education you're having probably makes you fairly open to new experiences, to new situations, and you probably want those things. But I would say to young people, go for it. Do what you think is – find your passion.

[00:41:14]

Jane Walters: Because if you find that which you think you were meant to do, you cannot be defeated, and you will find it. And you will always know. I tell people all the time. A lot of people know how and what and when and where, only some of us know why, and if you know why you will never be defeated.

~~*Dara Chesnutt:*~~ *Holly James:* Thank you very much for your cooperation, and we really loved hearing your story.

Jane Walters: I wish you well on this project.

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