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Interviewee: Steve Lockwood

Interviewers: Madalyn Bryant

Location: Frayser Community Development Corporation, Memphis, TN

Collection:

Notes:

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Madalyn Bryant: Alright. On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom and Rhodes College, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Madalyn Bryant, a recent graduate of Rhodes College. I'm honored to speak with you today. It's July 3rd and we are currently at Frayser Community Development Corporation. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Thank you very much for your participation. The interview today will start with some introductory questions about your background and then move on to your early years in Memphis, the financial crisis, and your work at the CDC. Just to start out with a few questions, both for the record and to get us started, what is your name?

Steve Lockwood: Steve Lockwood.

Bryant: When were you born?

Lockwood: September 14th, 1949.

Bryant: Alright, and where-

Lockwood: Quite a while ago. I was born in Elgin, Illinois.

Bryant: Alright, and can you tell me a little bit about the community where you grew up?

Lockwood: Nope, don't know a thing

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about it. My father was in graduate school and I was living on my grandparents' farm in Palatine and we left there when I was, I don't know, three.

Bryant: Yeah. Would you say that you grew up somewhere, do you have a neighborhood from your childhood?

Lockwood: I grew up more than anything in a small town called Big Rapids, Michigan. Not Grand Rapids, but Big Rapids.

Bryant: Yeah.

Lockwood: A small college town.

Bryant: Ok.

Lockwood: My dad was a college professor.

Bryant: Ok, so he had finished graduate school by that point.

Lockwood: He did.

Bryant: And what about your mom. What did she do?

Lockwood: She died when I was six of Hodgkin's Disease, which is now curable, but at that time it was not. So I was just raised by my dad, which is why I spent all my summers with my grandparents. He could get a break from us in the summertime.

Bryant: And did you have any other siblings?

[2:00]

Lockwood: Two sisters. They're both on the West Coast. Still alive. One older, one younger.

Bryant: How did growing up when and where you did influence your work and who you are now, would you say? A broad question.

Lockwood: So I mostly grew up in a small town. My father was a social activist. He didn't talk about it very much, but he was a draft resistor in the Second World War, which was a pretty unusual position. He was a pacifist and my grandmother was an old socialist from way back and I spent my summers and vacations with her. So I was around social activists. Then in my last two years of high school, I had this strange opportunity. My dad quit his job

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and went back to grad school. So he and I lived in married student housing on the campus of Michigan State University for two years, which was a life changing experience. Not only being on the campus of the University as a 16 year old, but I changed schools, it was the beginning of the Vietnam War era, I was lucky enough to hook up with 10 great friends and we started our, I guess our careers as anti-war activists at that point. Me and a couple of handfuls of people were cofounders of Students for Peace and Freedom in 1965.

Bryant: Wow.

Lockwood: We're all, I think it's fair to say, all good friends still. It's great. One of them lives in Memphis here.

Bryant: And what was school like for you, then, with your dad in graduate school and you switched near the end of high school?

[4:00]

Lockwood: Well, it was chaotic and good and bad and everything in between. It's not easy to change schools when you're 15 and, you know, most of the kids had normal households and I'm living in this little apartment with my dad. I guess that stresses like that are good for you as well as- And I even knew at the time this is an eye opener. I'm not sure I knew exactly what that meant, but I knew it was an eye opener. I felt lucky to have gotten out of that little town, to be perfectly truthful. And I've still got good friends from that town, too, but it wasn't a place with a great vision, I would say.

Bryant: So when you started doing anti-war activism, was that still in Michigan or was that in Chicago?

Lockwood: That was in East Lansing, where I spent my last two years, right. And then another ten years until the war ended.

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Bryant: I don't know, are there any stories from that time that stand out to you?

Lockwood: Wow, I have plenty. We started out, you know, you're kids right? We started out getting together and drinking beer and, but we talked politics. So our first activities we ever did was we bought little paint brushes and went out one night after drinking beer and went to some of the mansions in East Lansing and those little statues in the yards of those little black guys standing there that are meant to hold horses back in the day, we snuck up on these places and painted them white with

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blue eyes and just ran off in the dark. Pretty soon we graduated to hanging sheets off of bridges saying, "Stop the war." In a time when, I think, an awful lot of people didn't know we were in a war, it was kind of the whole point. We gradually got a little bit more sophisticated and started a newspaper and about got all kicked out of school for handing out the newspaper 'cause first amendment rights weren't particularly embraced at the moment. It was a good way to start and, by the way, it was a lot of fun.

Bryant: Wow. So, how did you end up in Memphis?

Lockwood: I wandered here. I was living in California and I was tired of being in California and I was splitting up from a long-time girlfriend. California was frankly a

very dangerous place to be at that time. Literally dangerous. Especially if you were an anti-war activist.

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So I hit the road to do some travelling and I visited my father who then was living in Barrington and I visited my old girlfriend who was getting a Master's Degree at Purdue. I visited an old friend in Memphis and I was tired of traveling. That was in 1975 and he said, "You can live in my attic and I got a job for ya." So I just never left. It was a really different place to me. In 1975 in Memphis it felt like a foreign country. My friend, Mark, was mostly hanging out in a neighborhood called Bearwater, which was a very low income black community and so, boom, that's where I was hanging out and it was just a different world. It felt like I had gone to another continent. It was fun. They spoke English, but it was different. Different than California and it was different than Michigan so I found it fascinating. I'm a guitar player,

[8:00]

so that was kind of nice. I pretty quickly ran into a whole circle of people who are still my oldest friends in town as well who are guitar players. Those that are still alive, anyway.

Bryant: What was the job that your friend had gotten for you?

Lockwood: Terrible job. I was laying asphalt. Laying asphalt in the summer in Memphis... asphalt's like 600 degrees. Terrible job. I didn't do that for very long.

Bryant: So then, did you move on to music initially or-

Lockwood: I did music, but I also joined the Carpenters Union. It's funny how career paths go because that also I didn't like very well. Not because I didn't like the work, but it was being in a Carpenters Union in 1975 was about like being in the Ku Klux Klan. It was all white and it was rough in that sense.

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I came home too angry every day. So I quit and was self-employed. Started buying old houses and fixing them in Midtown and I did that for the better part of 20 years instead of having a real job and it was a great way to make a living. But it sort of morphed into being able to do CDC work in some ways.

Bryant: What was the first house? What was the day when you were like, "I'm gonna to buy a house and I'm gonna fix it up."

Lockwood: It was scary. It was a bad house in a bad neighborhood and it cost \$3500.

Bryant: What neighborhood?

Lockwood: Annesdale Snowden, I guess you'd call it. Very near where I live now. It's near Cooper Young, which is where I live and have for 40 years. Yeah and I didn't know how to fix it, quite honestly. That's where I learned.

Bryant: When was that?

Lockwood: '76, '77, something around there.

Bryant: So that was pretty soon after you got here.

Lockwood: Pretty soon, yeah.

[10:00]

Bryant: Have you lived in Cooper Young for-

Lockwood: Since '76.

Bryant: Since '76.

Lockwood: It wasn't cool when I moved in.

Bryant: What has it been like watching Cooper Young change or how has it changed?

Lockwood: It's been really good and not entirely good. When we moved there it wasn't rough, but it was a little beat up and there was nothin' but little old ladies. My wife doesn't like me to say this, but we've been there so long that now my wife's the little old lady. Early on it became sort of an alternative, sort of artsy neighborhood and now artists and unemployed carpenter types would move in there. Now, it's gotten pretty expensive. So people moving in now, I mean a house sold down the block from me for \$314,000 last week. So that's not who moves in anymore.

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They're not bad people, but it's just that's how neighborhoods, I mean all of this story is about the transformation of neighborhoods and what they do. So it's become a highly desirable and pretty expensive neighborhood, right? Still a nice place to live. Taxes are going up, though. And you know that the commercial district is very nice. My wife's out of town, I walked down to the corner last night to a Chinese restaurant and sat at the bar and had a beer and a bit of food-

Bryant: Was it Mulan?

Lockwood: Yeah. And, you know, that's two blocks from my house. That's pleasant, right? It's good. And there's some music there, such as that.

Bryant: What kind of communities were you involved in or have you been involved in in Cooper Young? 'Cause technically these were questions about your introduction to Memphis, but clearly conversation can go wherever it goes.

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My initial question was what communities were you involved in in your early years in Memphis.

Lockwood: Well, I spent a lot of time buying houses in Cooper Young and fixin them before they were radically expensive and sellin them and doing it again. I mean, if you want to morph into this, in '95 I got a call from a friend saying there's this thing called the Community Development Corporation in another neighborhood and you should apply to be the Director. What I should mention was that I had also done a fair amount of nonprofit work. I'd served on the Board of Directors and done some grant writing in that context as a volunteer. Most of that was through WEVL radio and not a commercial radio station. So I knew something about nonprofits and what a 501c3 meant and what a Board of Directors meant and that sort of thing. I had the opportunity

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to start doing housing on behalf of the neighborhood instead of just as a private guy and nobody really in this city knew what a community development corporation was, me included. But they were interested in me because most of the people who had done that work before were academics and it hadn't necessarily gone like they wanted, so they said, "We want to hire somebody that actually knows construction and knows that side of those things." So I was kind of lucky I had some nonprofit experience here and some actual, practical construction experience here. Still to this day 22 years later I'm still most comfortable with the housing side because that's what I know a lot about.

Bryant: WEVL radio?

Lockwood: Wee-val radio. W-E-V-L.

Bryant: How did you get involved with that?

Lockwood: I don't know, I mean they just played cool Memphis music and I heard them and went down and started volunteering and they're still there.

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Bryant: What is their number?

Lockwood: 89.9

Bryant: Ok, I know 89.9. Cool. What did you do for fun, though, in Memphis when you were younger? Or was it really flipping houses all the time?

Lockwood: Well, no, you know, I played guitar. I drank beer. I hung out with friends. I played tennis. I played volleyball 'till I blew a knee. I played competitive volleyball. That was fun. Just had a circle of kids and before you know it I was raising my own kids, which is fun in its own way. We actually, early on when I was self-employed we did a lot of traveling. My son's 37, when he was five we realized we were hitting the school system for the next 15 years or something. It sort of freaked us out, so we hit the road for four months and traveled with my kids. I had a two year old and a five year old and we traveled

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all over this continent and saw all kind of cool stuff and came back literally two days before school started for a kindergartener. It was great. Other times, later on in the summertimes we would go canoeing in Canada for six weeks and stuff like that that a lot of people won't have the opportunity to do, but because I was self-employed I could kind of time my housing work and do that. It was fun. And that's one of the disadvantages of this job here is I don't do that anymore.

Bryant: So, two kids. Your son's 37. You have another child who was two?

Lockwood: Yeah, my daughter's 34.

Bryant: Sorry, I'm re-deciding where to pick up. And so, starting to work at VECA,

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Right, that was the community association that you had-

Lockwood: Vollentine Evergreen Community Development Corporation

Bryant: Starting there, were there things that surprised you? You had a little bit of nonprofit experience, but this is a little bit of a different side.

Lockwood: Yeah, I mean, 22 years later I think I'm still getting used to what nonprofit housing means. One of our key roles here is to work in the market when the market's broken. If the market was working, we wouldn't really be needed here. Just understanding, coming to terms with the fact that you have to invest money in that. Sometimes people look at that as throwing away money. I've studied it long enough, I really think I understand it now, but we often spend \$70,000 on a house that's worth 62 when you're finished and people would say, how can that possibly be rational or sane and reasonable, but

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if you think about- Well first of all if you don't do that and just let the house fall down and be an overgrown vacant lot for 20 years, what do those actions do to the surrounding neighborhoods, for the surrounding neighborhoods. We've actually done some analysis of what our investment in blight does for the surrounding houses and surrounding neighborhoods and the data shows that it affects houses for 500 feet in all directions. Just coming to terms with the fact that you have to invest some money, but in fact then it actually pays off. But it's hard to measure, ok. It's been a half of a lifetime experience, trying to understand that, wrap my hands around that.

Bryant: We had spoken a little bit before the camera was on about what a community development corporation is, but what do you think of as a community development corporation?

Lockwood: Well, we work in neighborhoods that had been disinvested. That's a broad term that talks about

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money flowing out of the neighborhoods. How that manifests is that middle class people move out, physical conditions deteriorate, businesses move out, jobs move out, and all of that. It's really our job to reverse that trend and every neighborhood's different. Twenty years ago I think all of CDCs kind of envisioned themselves doing the same thing. They were buying old houses and fixing them and putting them back in service, maybe building some new houses. As we've gone on, different communities have gone in different directions. So there are CDCs that are running charter schools and there are CDCs that are working on food security, whether it's to bring in grocery stores or setting up their own stores or growing food or educating people about food. There are still CDCs that are

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working on housing. They may own apartment complexes. They may be rebuilding houses. This neighborhood, when I got here in 2002, I started studying it. I mean once you do when you get to a neighborhood you spend a while figuring out what you got, 'cause there really wasn't a baseline of that information. So I looked at census data and I talked to a lot of people and just drove around and looked and I found that, even at that time before the collapse of the mortgage market, that this was a real center for foreclosure. Housing foreclosure. There were a lot of houses being lost to banks. We started acquiring houses that otherwise would be empty and abandoned and working on them. The pace of that picked up pretty radically and we haven't really departed from that. Our bread and butter is that we buy blighted houses or acquire blighted houses- a lot of the time we get them free- and we make them, we take them from being the worst house on the block to being the

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best house on the block and that's something that makes great sense for us to be doing here. I particularly look for houses that nobody else would do. There's plenty of houses that people pick up and put a paint job on and it doesn't mean we never do that, but we really look for houses then we look for what the effect will be on the street, right? Our slogan isn't like "One house one family at a time," it's really like "How can we invest in our resources, both financial and our energies and our skills in order to have the greatest impact- what we could call a strategic impact on the area." That's complicated work, right? So, we're somewhat traditional in that sense. We have done 170 rehabs. It's not on camera, but that map shows all the houses that we've done. The red ones

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are the one's we're still working on and the green ones we've completed whether we've rented them, sold them, or whatever. That whole rental/sales thing is another question. We've built two new houses. We were starting to build new houses when the mortgage market collapsed and the financial realities didn't really work anymore. We're going to start building 10 new houses this year because the market- Changes have come and it's not just- Yeah, there's a number of different reasons, including that I've spent a lot of time talking to banks lately and the banks now will loan in this neighborhood whereas they would not even a year ago. They would not loan in this neighborhood a year ago. Now they actually beat our doors down. They want to make, they want to make loans in this neighborhood. So we're venturing into new house building. I'm also looking seriously at trying to get into multi-family business. That means apartment complexes and I've just never found a way that I could do that without making us go broke. And

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you know we're nonprofit, but were a very business-like nonprofit and we have to make enough money to stay alive and we have to do projects that work financially and we've actually been very good at that. This is a very stable business here. It's a mission-based nonprofit, but, as I've told people, that if we're out of money our lights are just as off as anybody else's lights. We don't get much free here and we have eight staff people that have to be paid every day and their kids go to school and all those things, right? So, finances. We're looking into trying to find a way to get into the multi-family market. Multi-family at this juncture in Frayser is probably the greatest source of blight. There are lots and lots of apartment complexes that are empty and abandoned or half-full and dangerous and just not contributing to the neighborhood. And so, we're working on- That's the latest thing. And we've done some commercial.

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We're still a development corporation, meaning we develop real estate. Now, that said we also do counseling to go with that. We have home ownership counseling, HUD-certified

home buyer ed. in this room. We get 25 people together monthly and give them a certified eight hour class. We do foreclosure counseling. We do that free. We're really good at it. I mentioned that- This neighborhood has suffered more foreclosures this century than any neighborhood in Tennessee. It was ground zero for predatory lending in the early 2000s and therefore became ground zero for foreclosure and bankruptcy. We led the state about 12 years in a row. We finally don't, but there were times when this neighborhood had 900 foreclosures in a year. That resulted in all the empty and blighted houses. So that's' what we do, but it's really about knowing your neighborhood, bringing in resources. My good friends at

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Binghampton are right now building a shopping center with a grocery store. That'll bring jobs and food availability as well as some other things to that neighborhood. It's great, I'm proud of them. And that variety of functions really has broadened over the last number of years.

Bryant: There are so many things there... You talked about kind of, when you first got to Frayser, looking at census data, talking to people, but how were you introduced to Frayser? How-

Lockwood: How'd I get here?

Bryant: Yeah!

Lockwood: Ok. When I left VECA I spent several years being a grantor of funds to neighborhoods with the now defunct Memphis Community Development Partnership. MCDP. So, as the program

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director, I granted money to the works in South Memphis. We put the first dollars into the Stax Museum. They came to us and said, "We're community development." We looked at it and said, "You're not typical, but we think you're right." So we gave them \$90,000 to get started. I'm proud of that one. We granted \$30,000 to a fledging little old Frayser CDC to formulate a Board and get the 501c3 together and hire a director and such as that. That was in the year 2000, so in '02 when they didn't have a Director anymore they called me up and asked me would I come for 90 days to just help put out flyers and help them through a tough transition. I said I would. I already had a job, but I worked here part-time and

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after 45 days said, "You know, I think this is a good job. I'm a good fit and if you guys want me I'll stick around." So I've been here for 15 years. I spent the first year working here half-time. Sole employee. Half-time. It was very hard working two jobs half-time.

That's harder than one job full-time. Then transitioning to being here full-time. We started out in the community center in a cubicle in this raucous, loud, basketball place and pretty soon we had too much going on and we got a free little storefront from the Belz's over in a shopping center over that way and spent three or four years there until we had four or five employees and they got kind of- We were all sitting in each others' laps, you know? And then the city helped us buy this building 10 years ago, which has been- But really we've outgrown this building, but it's such a cool location that- We're looking maybe at doing an addition on the

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back. We'll see how much that costs maybe we can afford it next year. This location has been very good for us because we're visible and people see us and we got a marquee out front and it's just brought us out front into the neighborhood. It's been very good.

Bryant: How do you balance your work and personal life? I guess this is another question about- So through this time when you're working two jobs and all of that, what impact has doing this kind of work done to you?

Lockwood: This is hard work. I don't have any plans to retire, but it's grueling work and it's nerve-wracking and there's no safety net. I'm not gonna say that it has threatened my family life or anything because I don't think that's the case, but

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it's not easy. You have to force yourself not to work too much. It's not easy to quit it when you go home. The phone rings anyway and it's hard to unplug from it. I guess that's a personality thing. Not so much the job, but a personality thing. I've been doing it a long time and I feel like it's a great opportunity and privilege, even, if you will, to make a living off getting to do- I told you my background. I'm a social activist, outspoken guy and to get paid to do that full-time is not only a great privilege, but it's pretty unusual. Who gets to do that? Not very many people. I try to leave it alone when I go home.

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Bryant: The next group of questions are more about predatory loaning and the financial crisis. Clearly Frayser was particularly affected and you brought that up a little, too, but can you tell me about your personal and professional experience and what you have seen in this neighborhood with predatory lending?

Lockwood: In '02, I had just studied foreclosure as well as a lot of other things and found that it was already a big problem and ever since been trying to learn more about what that means. In '05 I hired a young woman from the neighborhood. She really wandered in as a volunteer and then was a paid intern through the HCD program. She's been here ever since and she's still here. She morphed into our foreclosure counselor and she and I

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have, ever since, been studying on the phenomenon. We used to do an annual report in this neighborhood. We're talking '05, '06, '07. Essentially, we were screaming about the predatory lending practices that were going on and what the results of that were and the honest truth is that nobody cared. Nobody cared at all. People were losing their houses; nobody cared. When did they care? They cared when Wall Street started taking a beating. By that time the die was cast. It was really too late. I don't think we- We knew the problem, we did not- I don't think anybody was smart enough to really envision what the impact would be and just how many- Because ultimately it wasn't just people who

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got bad loans who lost their houses because those initial loans where people took out adjustable rate mortgages and oftentimes didn't know it were not- There was no transparency requirement and so they thought they were getting a reasonable loan and they weren't. Those people lost homes and abandoned those homes and the homes became blighted and so the people next door may have had a perfectly reasonable loan, but they bought their house for \$60,000. Now they're next to a house that sold at foreclosure auction for \$7,000 and their house is worth \$35 now, they bought it for \$60 and if they've gotta sell, they can't. So they just walk away from the loan and people who made very reasonable decisions also got caught up in it so the housing values here- This was already always an inexpensive neighborhood, but the average house sold for \$47,000

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in '05. 'Bout '09 the average house sold for \$17, which means that everybody was under water who had bought a house in the last 20 years. Everybody owed more on their house than- It was really devastating. That was a depressing part of this job. Overseeing the housing operation when I knew we were drowning was really hard. It was hard personally, sometimes. Then we got a foreclosure counselor. We about had to give people grief counseling because we just had little old ladies in here crying because they'd been swindled and now their life savings were evaporating and it was and is really, really sad. It's not really done with, but we've passed the worst of that storm. We're about to have recovered from that storm.

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Couple weeks ago the Daily News local business journal printed an article about how the rebound and the high activity in housing sales, but they left out, and I called up the author of the article and said, "This is a perfectly decent article but you left out the fact that Frayser is gaining value faster than any neighborhood in Memphis. Maybe you should've said that." Anyway, the cool news is this week sometime they're gonna print a special article just about that. I mean, this neighborhood is now rising at 38% clip a year. Now the average house is up to \$33,000. Still underpriced. Still too cheap. The prices need to

go up in order to- We talked about bringing capital back into this neighborhood and that's part of the process.

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Bryant: Can you talk a little bit about the kind of work of the buying homes project? Particularly after the crisis. Not saying the crisis is entirely over, but in response particularly to the predatory lending and financial crisis.

Lockwood: As I told you, we look for the impact of what we acquire and what the impact will be. We don't purchase just anywhere. Of course, like any nonprofit, we've got our Board Directors, mostly residents, and that's not always the case. These are mostly residents. We've thought long and hard over the years as to what's a really strategic approach to that. What we've ended up doing is working primarily in what we call the C-neighborhoods, the neighborhoods that are fraying badly around the edges, but that are not

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totally blown to hell. And that with a moderate investment you can tip them back. So those are called tipping point neighborhoods. We've gotten more and more adept at doing that. My favorite thing, and we get to do this every now and then, we're just finishing up one right now, but every third house or so we get a house that's been abandoned for, like, nine years. The doors have been opened and people have stolen everything worth stealing and people been living in it and kids been partying in it and all of that and it's just squalid. We're just finishing one that we got free and then we put a ton of money into it and it's really kind of- Sometimes it even surprises me, and I'm an old housing guy, just how beautiful they are when they're finished. Nobody but us would do it. Anybody in their right mind would look at that and go, "Jeez, tear that thing down." Some of these things you can't even see them through all the bushes

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and the ivy on them and they're covered up in branches and you have to just about get in with a fireman's ax. That's a great joy, but it's also a profound positive effect on the surrounding neighborhoods. That's really our thing and we finally did a study on that. We got a piece of money that only covered about a quarter of Frayser and I had an intern about five years ago drive the entire neighborhood and I said, "Alison, tell me where the tipping point is. The best tipping point in this territory where there are houses available that are blighted and need to be worked on. All the houses haven't been knocked down so there's reasonable density still and there's still some homeowners." You can tell who the homeowners are. You can drive through the neighborhood and go there's one, you know, you can tell. "Where there's still some strengths left, but

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if we don't intervene this neighborhood is gonna circle down the toilet." She picked a neighborhood, it was a quarter square mile. Maybe three blocks by five blocks. I looked at and thought, "Yeah, I think you're right." It wasn't even the neighborhood I was expecting, but yeah, I think this is it. We went in and we, first of all, we used a law called the Neighborhood Preservation Act and we sued 25 negligent property owners. Every nasty, abandoned, empty house. We sued them.

Bryant: In environmental court, then?

Lockwood: Yeah. Yeah. Fortunately for us using city attorneys and their money. We were gonna pay for it ourselves and at the last minute they handled it. Would've cost us 20 grand to do that, but we didn't have to pay that. That was nice. Different things happened with those houses. Some of them the owner actually fixed it. Some of them they boarded it up. A couple of them they tore them down, whether we wanted them torn down or not. Couldn't always control that. Some of them got sold to other people who fixed them. Three

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of them got given to us. We ended up acquiring 18 houses in that little territory and we put a million dollars into fixing them. Then because it was a really tight little territory, we had the ability to measure the impact of it in a way that we had not done when we were more scattered in our work. So we did that and based on data, more academic data that we looked at from Philadelphia and Atlanta and Richmond and Baltimore and other cities that have some commonalities with us, we determined that our million dollar investment had raised the value of that community six million dollars. Six to one swing is very good and consequently we estimated that the city and county would make \$119,000 in new tax income

[39:00]

off of our million dollar investment, which is a 12% return. Wasn't even their money, but it doesn't matter whose money it was. We actually turned this into a really, pretty articulate powerpoint. I got a really great graphic designer to help me with it. That's really the first time we'd done anything like that, to demonstrate that if you invest in blight in the right territory, stress in the right territory, doesn't work just anywhere, if you do that wisely, judiciously, you can actually make money. This is a very poor city, so if you can convince the city and county and perhaps the state and some of the foundations that really scientific investment into blighted neighborhoods can actually bring density back in, bring population back in, but also raise tax base in such a way that it's not all about finances, but if you can show them you can make money doing that, that's a pretty profound thing.

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And we might find more resources in order to move forward. That's a work in progress, right?

Bryant: Going off of that, what is the interaction between your work and the more formal political structures like city government?

Lockwood: This job is far more political than I ever anticipated on a couple levels. We get funded by city, county, state, fed and reputations and relationships with all of those people are probably far more important than they should be, but they are. So, we spend a fair amount of time talking with, understanding, negotiating with, city, county, state entities. We have a

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citywide trade association of CDCs and it was for years called Community Development Council. It's now been rebranded as Building Memphis. For 15 years, I've chaired the Policy Committee of that body as a volunteer board member guy. I served on the board for most of those years as well. If you're in this business for quite a while, you start looking, you start finding the structural obstacles to the work that we do. Some of it's really in the weeds and reasonably technical and it requires technical solutions that are harder than they look. I've been involved in that work for years and years. Now, I'll give you one example. We encounter

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blighted houses all the time where nobody's paid taxes for nine years. We just did one, in fact, there's a picture of it on the wall behind you. It, again, was another one that was empty for nine years. No kidding. Nice green roof there, right? It's the nice one in the middle, not the old-

Bryant: It looks really nice at the end. The-

Lockwood: No, not that one.

Bryant: Oh.

Lockwood: See, look at the one in the middle. To the left.

Bryant: Oh, the agency data one?

Lockwood: Yeah. Yeah. We just finished that one. Somebody moved into it on Saturday. That other one was a little shack that I gave away to somebody and she fixed it. That's a four-room shack. I was gonna tear down some day, but I donated it to the resident and she fixed it. Gosh, I interrupted myself. What was I saying?

[43:00]

Bryant: I actually also got pulled into the conversation about the house.

Lockwood: Let's start over. We'll get there.

Bryant: We were talking about your work as a policy volunteer and the question was about-

Lockwood: Oh yeah, ok, I'm back to the example. So we encounter houses like that one with the nice green roof and it was totally blighted. It had \$19,000 in back taxes on it. I spoke to the woman who owned it and she said, "I don't own it." And I said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but yes you do. You thought you gave it back to the bank, but the bank never took it." It's called a zombie foreclosure. They just sit there.

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It is against the state's constitution for the city and county to forgive those taxes. We're caught in limbo. The lady can't give it to me because if she does, I owe the \$19,000 in taxes and it's worth less than zero. So Mayor Strickland, who at the time was head of City Council, and I came up and devised a plan where I can acquire a house like that and actually, if I have the money, which we do at this juncture, I pay the taxes and then the city and the county can make a donation to me. Not to reimburse me for the taxes, 'cause that would be unconstitutional, but to contribute toward the rehab of the property. That still has not passed, by the way. It's been through several readings at City Council and County Commission. It's been approved by the State Attorney General three times because we had to make sure it was

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constitutional. Because it's close, right? It looks a little bit like forgiveness of taxes, but it's not. That's just typical of it. We've been working on this for three and a half years now. So it's very political and you have to work public perception and that includes politics and it includes building the image of the neighborhood and building the image of this corporation and all of that. It's part of the job.

Bryant: Does the work that you do interact with, then, social movements and any of that in the city of Memphis?

Lockwood: Yeah, you know on a neighborhood level we have always said, "You do not transform a neighborhood just through housing work." But we've also

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always said, "This is really hard work. We can't do everything." If you go to my partners, other stakeholders in this neighborhood and you ask them, "What does Steve say?" They will all tell you, "He says, 'Pick one or two things and get good at it'." We have to each

stay in a lane and be good at these things. I've been here 15 years. I do a lot more interact in the neighborhood now with those who are working on issues of schools. There are incredible problems with schools. Issues of crime. Incredible problem with crime. Issues of jobs and job training and such. There's really not enough- Really we don't have someone who's full-time in that lane. That's unfortunate. Transit. We got a great problem with that. Getting to jobs from this neighborhood is a great problem, but I'm pleased with the fact that inside the neighborhood I've got more friends and allies and we get together and talk about the intersection of our work much more than we used to.

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You may know this, when the achievement school district came into being five years ago and they studied this state and said, "We're gonna take over the bottom 5% schools," what neighborhood had the highest concentration of failing schools in the state?

Bryant: Frayser?

Lockwood: Frayser. Thirteen of our 15 schools were bottom 5%. Think about it. It's a stunning statistic. It just rolls off the tongue, but it's stunning, right? We haven't solved that problem, but we've got some really admirable people working on that. I'm careful to point out I'm not an educational expert, but- Frayser High School got taken over by a local Frayser-generated charter called Frayser Charters and it is now Martin Luther King Prep. The Director there is my good friend Bobby White

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who's actually a fairly young guy who came out of this neighborhood. He's got great credibility, he's a powerful, really good guy. We actually got special funding to do blight elimination around that school in order really to try to use our skills to increase the chances of his effort being successful. So we're partners in that work. Cool. We're still working on it. There's a huge blighted building across the street from his school. It's an old church complex that we're working on to find a constructive reuse for it because I don't want it just torn down and be about two acres of blighted, overgrown weeds if we don't reuse the building. We're working on it. We meet in this room monthly with the police and code enforcement and activist little old ladies who are reporting blighted properties. It's a meeting about the intersection of crime and blight and code enforcement

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and housing and all how those issues intersect. It's called the Police Join Agency. I chair that meeting and it's hard work. I wish somebody else would chair it. We're making progress. On a citywide basis we have similar interactions, in fact it's seductive. You have to be really cautious not to spend too much time on all of that work outside of here because we've all got- I mean we own 107 houses. We manage them, we fix them, we got business to do. We do counseling things and all of that. Yet, that said, the city has

embarked on a new comprehensive plan. The Memphis 3.0. There's no way that I can't be involved in that. I spend time-

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I'm on the housing subcommittee of that really trying to help craft the direction of the city particularly in terms of housing and, quite honestly, on a self-serving level for Frayser, craft a message that will make reinvestment in Frayser part of the revitalization of this entire city, which I truly believe we can be part of the solution in terms of bringing density back in, bringing people back in. We're right close to downtown, it's highly affordable, we got land and location. The highway's right there. So it's my job to take that message to the 3.0 planning process. Spend a lot of time doing that.

Bryant: How does your race affect the work that you do? How has your perception of race also shifted over-

Lockwood: When I got here this neighborhood was 60:40 black:white, so it wasn't that odd that I was here. One reason that I came here and can come here

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is if you go to Orange Mound, Orange Mound is probably 99% African American. It's not like I couldn't be the Director of Orange Mound's CDC, but it would just be too difficult. This is a hard enough job as it is and to throw one more obstacle in there would be too tough. Race has certainly at times been an issue here. There have been times when I have not been trusted. It's pretty easy for people- It's a very low-income community. That's a technical term. This is at 58 percentile of median. That's a very low-income community. Low-income communities have been ripped off and abused throughout history and it's very easy for people to read in the paper that this agency got a \$600,000 grant from the state and it's very easy for people to imagine, who don't understand the kind of accountability that we have- think that a guy like me gets to put half that in my pocket, which couldn't be further from the truth. Race further- It's just

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another obstacle. That said, we've worked very hard to create an agency that looks like the neighborhood. At this particular moment, the staff here is two white guys, I gotta think for a minute, and seven black women. The Board is comparable. The Board represents this neighborhood. In spite of that, there are times when people would tell you that this is a white agency 'cause I'm here. Just is what it is. I think in time your work will speak for itself. We can't, and I can't spend all my time playing defense. We have some great, amazing

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allies in this neighborhood. All of whom are African American. Those that really do the work understand each other. We work with Lifeline 2 Success, which is a prison reentry program. We work with Girls, Inc., which is exactly what it sounds like and works with young women and girls from various schools here and do a lot of agriculture in the neighborhood. We work with, I guess you'd say, 20 other agencies like that. Again, I mentioned Bobby White at Martin Luther King Prep. It's not like we don't ever have differences of opinions, but we know how to do that. We know how to have differences of opinion. What's rough sometimes is when folks who don't have experience and are maybe naïve about the processes, and distrusting, not without some cause, don't necessarily understand

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the work that we do. Sometimes things come along that cause stresses and, again, stresses where people disagree. Race is always a good thing to disagree about or to be distrustful about. A number of years back there was a project from D.C. and these people were absolute idiots and they came in calling themselves for doing an organizing project and helping us, quote unquote, with this sort of mythical thing of saying, "Play your cards right and there's gonna be five million dollars at the end of this rainbow." I'd been at this a long time, I knew there was no damn five million dollars. I told them you're gonna drive a deep wedge in here and you're gonna have people slitting each other's' throats over this stuff and it happened. Happened probably worse than I thought. We've pretty much recovered from that damage, but now in North Memphis, not this neighborhood, fortunately, it's happening with another project called Spark. I'm keeping my nose out of it because

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when you go into very low income communities and start waving around mythical dollars, you can really upset the ecosystems that are very fragile. It's been interesting racially. Fortunately for me, my friends here, we can be pretty blunt about it and we joke about who I am. They say, "You know your real problem here, dontcha?" I say, "Yeah, I know my real problem." "Yeah, you're white!" We've built an agency we're real proud of here and it looks like the neighborhood and it works for the neighborhood and most people know that. Life's complicated.

Bryant: Thank you. The question, I think, it's around 11:30 and so we're trying to wrap up. Just the last couple of questions. Where

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do you see Frayser 10 years from now?

Lockwood: We really are making progress here. I didn't get a chance to talk about our homeownership campaign and it's a good example. I told you the banks didn't used to loan, but that's changed. I've spent a lot of time talking to banks in the last year. We now

have a list of lenders that really want to lend here and will make these small loans. Thirty, 40, 50 thousand dollar loans. Prices are rising. We think we can recover a lot of the lost homeownership. Where we want to be is a neighborhood that's a great choice for working families. You want a really diverse neighborhood. You'd like middle class people here. Some of that will happen, but that's probably a little bit unrealistic. One of the slogans in this campaign-

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Our main slogan is, "Don't rent for 700, own for 480." We can sell houses to people for that kind of money, and less in fact. Nice houses. Another one of our slogans is, "If you make \$10 now you can buy a house in Frayser." That's the truth. We've actually marketed a fair amount downtown, Crosstown, Medical District and all that sort of thing thinking, there are \$12 an hour workers in the cafeteria at Methodist Hospital who cannot live in that neighborhood, but they can live three, four miles away here and even with the lousy bus system it's a short bus ride down that way. I see the affordability, the low value of this neighborhood being turned into an advantage and people really creating a boom of ownership and new housebuilding in this neighborhood. Along with that will come a lot of other things. The crime and schools- got to get better with that.

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Increased density and more working families coming in are bound to help with that. It's a tough prospect, though.

Bryant: Is there any advice you would want to say to young Memphians who want to make a positive impact on their communities? Or, what advice?

Lockwood: This business, for instance, is hard to break into. We've got eight employees. I run into plenty of folks who say, "Gee, this would be great to work in." I understand that, but I think there are a lot of ways to contribute to the revitalization of this community. Those who are in education can do it this way, those who are in law enforcement can do it this way. Those who are in job training can do it another way. Those who run grocery stores can do it a different way.

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There's a lot of ways to contribute to this. Neighborhoods are these complex, multi-cylindrical organisms and you don't have to work here to contribute. You can find a way. It's surprising, we need accountants. We don't just need people, loudmouths like me who talk loud. This business needs accountants. People who really understand numbers. I've proven that when you're in construction you can be, help to revive neighborhoods. I just would say open your eyes and figure out how you want to plug in.

Bryant: Is there anything else you would like to discuss that we haven't covered?

Lockwood: What have I not covered here? Not that I can think of. I would just say that-

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I've been here 15 years. It hasn't been always a real smooth sailing, but at this juncture, because of our business outlook, we've built a really stable agency here, so it's nice to know that- I don't expect to be here 10 years from now, but this agency will be here. I don't know what it'll look like, exactly, because it's supposed to change with the neighborhood, but it'll be here. I couldn't say that six years ago, but I can say that now. That's kind of nice.

Bryant: Thank you so much for participating in this Crossroads to Freedom interview and for having so much to say. I really appreciate you all.

Lockwood: I'm gonna say one other thing. Can I? This is more on a personal level. The way I may phase out of here is I consider running for City Council in '19. Three years from now, let's put it that way.

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If that were to happen, that'd probably be my transition out of here. A lot of people work in City Council, or serve in City Council have a full-time job, but I don't think I would do that. So we'll see if that happens. I feel like what I've done here is a lot of the same work as they do at the City Council so we'll see what happens. Keep your eye open for that.

Bryant: I will.

Lockwood: Thanks.