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Interviewee: Dr. Russ Wigginton

Interviewers: Brittney Threatt and Zaria Jones

Location: Rhodes College, Memphis, TN

Collection: \*

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Brittney Threatt: Take two. On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. My name is Brittney Threatt. I'm a class of 2017 graduate of Rhodes College.

Zaria Jones: I'm Zaria Jones, a Junior at Rhodes College.

Threatt: We are honored to meet you and learn about your work with the college through the years and your integral part in beginning Crossroads. It is July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and we are currently in Barret Library at Rhodes College. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website.

Jones: As you know, we like to start our Crossroads interviews with some introductions and your background. So, could you please state your name and position at Rhodes College?

Russ Wigginton: My name is Russell Thomas Wigginton, Jr. I'm Vice President for External Programs at Rhodes College.

Jones: And what year were you born?

Wigginton: 1966.

Jones: Where did you grow up? Could you please describe your community or neighborhood?

Wigginton: Sure. I grew up- I was born in

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Louisville, Kentucky and lived there from birth until about the second grade and moved to Evansville, Indiana and then in the fifth grade moved back to Louisville, Kentucky. In the seventh grade I moved to Nashville, Tennessee and I completed the rest of my secondary education in Nashville, Tennessee. So being born in Louisville, much of my family, both my parents and their siblings and extended family are there. So I grew up in the city surrounded by family for those early years in a couple different neighborhoods that were quite different. Early on, grew up in the west end part of Louisville, Kentucky, which is a predominantly African American community, a lot of older homes and established community and community organizations

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in that area. I would describe that as a very middle class community that I grew up in. Kind of older established African American community. Went to Evansville, Indiana, lived in a community where there were very few African Americans in that city and in the schools in which I attended. Moved back as I've mentioned and we moved into a more suburban community in Louisville, Kentucky. So I kind of experienced Louisville through two different types of communities. Still what would probably be described as middle class socioeconomic status, but very different communities. Similarly, moving to Nashville, similar socioeconomic status and probably a more integrated racially and ethnically

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mixed community than the kind of extremes, if you will, that the other communities had been. Made for an interesting childhood.

Jones: Was it difficult as a child moving around so much and being in these different communities that had people of different backgrounds?

Wigginton: I don't recall it being terribly difficult. I'm sure there was a few moments when, being the new kid, first day of school or getting adjusted, that sort of thing. But I found it to be certainly not something that I look back on as anything other than to my advantage. I feel like it helped me get acclimated and learn to deal with people of all types in all circumstances and found myself able to navigate those respective communities

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pretty comfortably and easily. And that has served me well most of the time.

Jones: Now, could you tell us a little bit about your upbringing? Your family and how they kind of reared you, raised you?

Wigginton: Sure, so I'm the oldest of three. I have a sister who is two years younger and I have a brother who is thirteen years younger and that was very interesting. A lot of those early moves he wasn't around. He wasn't born until we moved to Nashville, Tennessee. So I have sort of the pre- and post- Derek Wigginton sort of the ways my sister and I think about our upbringing. I feel so fortunate to have parents who were very committed and child-focused, or their children-focused. My dad is a graduate of Howard University

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and he was very much influenced in the early to mid-Sixties by that experience and was intimately involved in Civil Rights conversations as you would expect many students to be during that era. Especially if you were at a place like Howard. At the same time my mom did not go to college, but was very involved in the movement in a much more activist way. Sit-ins at Woolworths and a place in Louisville, going to jail, being arrested for helping to desegregate

public place and that sort. So it was an interesting combination. They went to school together, high school together, but come from very different parts of town. My dad comes from a long line of well-educated

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African Americans. The expectation to go to college. Very middle class socioeconomic status. My mom comes from a much more economically challenged background. My dad's one of four; all four went to college. My mom one of six, none who went directly to college out of high school. Raised by grandparents or great grandparents most of the time. My mom's mom died when my mom was six or eight, maybe, but young. She was third in the line and Dad was not able to take care of six kids by himself so they had a little more challenging background, but tremendous work ethic and that's one of the things that I felt was passed on to us. At least modeled for us. When my mom

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was 18, she was legal guardian. When she graduated from high school she was legal guardian of her 15 and 14 year old brother. So she was mothering at a very young age and I think my sister and I and my brother were the beneficiaries of that, quite frankly. So we grew up in a household where education was prominent. Their lives and my dad's career choices and stuff were very much focused around what was best for us. We went to some fine schools. My parents made the fiscal sacrifice to send us to what they thought were the best schools in the community. So they paid tuition for a long time and that was a sacrifice they were willing and happy to make. They instilled in all of us a certain sense of self confidence and self-worth

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and pride in who we were and what we come from and set high expectations for us as far as doing our best to reach our full potential whatever that may be. I consider myself really lucky. They also made sure, when they committed to us, their gift to us, if you will, as my dad liked to say it, "There won't be a huge trust fund for you when me and your mother are no longer here, but we will make sure you graduate from college debt free. And they provided that for all three of us. So I consider myself really lucky in a lot of ways and hopefully I described a few of those.

Jones: Could you describe a little bit more about your parents' occupations and how they were able to support your siblings the way they did?

Wigginton: Sure. My dad was, early on, he was a business major or a marketing major and he worked in sales and marketing

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early in his career for a major company and then went on to work for Louisville and Nashville Railroad where he was somewhat of a pioneer in Human Resources. One of the early initiatives in the early Seventies for Affirmative Action opportunities for African Americans and so he got

a lot of exposure in company railroads home offices in Louisville. So he got a lot of exposure being a young African American man in a company of that sort. So, he went on to be the first in a couple other types of jobs for that company, which I think has some tremendous benefits, but some challenges, too, and I got a chance as I was growing up to witness both sides of that. My mom was

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always a really hard worker who managed to win over people in some amazing ways. She is quite charming and quite- has a certain kind of authoritative nature about herself, such that she always found herself in positions that were above where most others were who held the role that she did. Oftentimes wherever we moved and landed, she would be the person in the role who did not have a college degree and end up leading that team or something. Spent a lot of time as Executive Assistant role for some corporations. She worked very closely with top management and understood how to do

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that role of confidentiality, the role of quick decision making, the role of navigating in-the-moment situations. They worked hard and made sure that all of our needs were met and some of our wants, but certainly not in any extravagant way.

Jones: Did religion play a huge role in your upbringing and if so, how?

Wigginton: I would say it played an important role from the standpoint of- we were raised Catholic and we went to Catholic schools K-12. But I wouldn't say that it was- The role was mostly played through that. I wouldn't say that it was

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spoken about in the household on a daily basis, for example, in any sort of prominent way. We certainly would go to Mass on Sundays, but it wasn't automatic, but it was regular. I wouldn't say we were guided by the religious influence in the house. We were guided much more by some basic values that you could associate with religion, but it wasn't presented necessarily through a religious or spiritual lens.

Jones: And last family question. Can you talk a little about what your siblings do now and your relationship with them and how that influences y'all's interaction and where you are today?

Wigginton: Yeah, so my sister and I, it was just us for a long time and so I think-

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When my brother came along in many ways for us it still was just us two. He probably got way more attention, as you might expect as the baby in the group, but we were sort of still in our own, had our own separate relationship due to longevity and being close in age. She is in management

for Allstate insurance company. She's been in that role or some version of management and marketing for probably 15 or so years, maybe a little longer. She actually lives in Louisville, Kentucky with her husband now. My brother is a recent transplant to Memphis, which is really exciting to have family in this city. It's been so long since I've lived in the same city with family. It's taken me

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a while to get adjusted. In a good way. He and his wife and daughter have been here about a year and a half and he is in an operations management position. He moved here to work at Nike. So they have done well professionally and within- you know, their families are in good standing, good stead.

Jones: For our second group of questions we'd like to talk about your career here at Rhodes and also your time as a student here at Rhodes. So for our first question, how did you end up at Rhodes?

Wigginton: There were a couple different angles that drew me to Rhodes. Different perspectives, you might say. I had a teacher in high school who attended what was then Southwestern at Memphis who I respected and who suggested that it would be an interesting place

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for me to consider. So having somebody who I respected share that with me played a part in my investigating the college. I was also recruited here for basketball and I was- Basketball was an important part of my life in high school and I was fortunate enough to play on some really good teams and I had a nice career and wanted to continue to play in college. A lot of the schools that recruited me in basketball did not have the academic emphasis that Rhodes did. I was interested in Rhodes kind of fundamentally because of that. And there had been folk- My high school in Nashville was a bit of a feeder to Rhodes, so I knew people who had gone to Rhodes. A lot of times when you're in high school if

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people before you who you respect choose a college you sort of are inclined to think positively of it. So I drove down for a visit. This was spring of- maybe late fall early spring of- 1984 before the college officially change its name. Well maybe late '83, early '84, when the college changed its name when fall classes started in '84. But I remember driving down and driving down N Parkway. No fence around the campus. Several buildings that are now here were not here. I remember just sort of seeing the campus from afar and it really having an impact on me. I remember just looking at it feeling like this is

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what college, this is sort of what college looks like and feels like. I went into it thinking it would be quite a privilege to continue my education at a place that was so idealic, frankly. I was also

very interested in the fact that the college was located in a city like Memphis. I had spent a little time in Memphis with my dad who had business down here and he was always really fond of Memphis. And I was inclined to be as well. I just thought a school like this in a fascinating and challenging community like Memphis could be interesting for me. I also knew if I went to a school as small as Rhodes was at that time I needed to be in a city that allowed me to not feel claustrophobic. I just had a gut intuition that that would be the case. Part of that was because

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I knew what the racial demographic was on campus. I also knew what the racial demographic was in Memphis. I found that that could mesh well with me and when I think about it now it may have had a little bit to do with the different kinds of places where I had lived and had experienced. So I needed to be in a community that allowed for a breadth of exposure for all different types of people.

Threatt: Was the teacher at your high school that influenced you to investigate Rhodes, where they black?

Wigginton: No.

Threatt: Ok, so you knew before you came down here that Rhodes was a PWI?

Wigginton: Yeah. I don't think I knew any- None of the students that I knew who had attended Rhodes from my high school were African American.

Threatt: Ok.

Wigginton: My high school was-

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I don't even remember the percentage- but it was overwhelming majority white. I knew what the demographic was basically when I got here. And I think I would not have been all that interested had it not been in a city like Memphis where the demographic was significantly different than Nashville.

Jones: I just wanted to clarify a little bit. When you said you didn't want to claustrophobic, where you talking more so about the racial makeup here?

Wigginton: I don't think I'd made it quite that precise. It was more about the size of the school in general. Rhodes was about the same size as my high school at the time. I think we had 1,200 students when I was here and that was about the same number I had in my high school. Being at a school that small, particularly when I knew that the number of students of color

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was also very small, that was- I could see myself engaging in Memphis where the demographic was quite different. And just the fascinating aspects of a city like Memphis. When I needed to just be in different space, it felt like I could do that pretty easily in Memphis.

Threatt: While you were at Rhodes, because it was a smaller school and you felt like you needed to be in the community more, did you do any community service or any community work while you were at Rhodes?

Wigginton: I did a little bit of community service, but my community engagement was much more social than it was community oriented. One of the major differences that I see between Rhodes then and now, and just all of our colleges and universities, frankly, is that there was much more an easier interaction

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With the other colleges and universities. I found myself on the campus of Christian Brothers College at the time, University of Memphis, or Memphis State at the time, and LeMoyne-Owen. I was on those campuses much more frequently than I've certainly been on those campuses, probably, since I've been back. And likewise many of those students were on our campus. It was just an easier exchange, if you will. So I would like to say that it was because I was spending 20 hours a week engaged in giving back to Memphis, but that would not be true.

Jones: Ok, so you mentioned a little about your social activities and you also stated that you came here for basketball, but can you describe some of the other activities that you were involved in while you were at Rhodes?

Wigginton: Sure. So I played basketball only my first two years here.

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I found that I had a great experience, I was fortunate enough to be a starter my first two years. I decided not to play anymore. What basketball meant to me had diminished a little bit. But I also found myself thinking, I'm really not taking full advantage of being at a place like this. I found myself not being as intellectually engaged as I wanted and needed to be. I found myself not being involved in other activities in the way that I felt like I should be by going to a place like Rhodes. So I got much more involved. I was always a member of the Black Student Association, but I decided I wanted to run for office and I was President my junior year. That meant a lot to me and helped me from a leadership development standpoint, but helped me be at

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the table, if you will, and understand the institution more deeply. I also worked for a marketing research firm part-time. Not 10 or 15 hours a month, but it was tremendous exposure for how to present myself, how to sell, how to market, how to communicate with a broad swath of people. It paid really well. That combination allowed me to sort of be in the community through a different lens. So, yeah it was- I found myself needing and wanting to be more engaged at the college. I

was amazed at how much more focused I became as a student as a byproduct of being more engaged

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on campus. My grades even got respectable at that point.

Jones: That's all that matters, man. You came in about 20 years after the first black students were admitted to Rhodes. Could you describe a little bit about your experiences here at the time? Especially as you got involved in BSA and became president.

Wigginton: One of the things that, even to this day, matters a great deal to me is how the alums, the African American alums, of the college, their presence, what that meant, them coming around, them coming to our meetings, them spending time with us was so important. I mean, we knew who they were, we wanted to be them, we wanted to be like them, and I'm not sure they fully appreciated

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how much they inspired and motivated us. But it was significant. We were very close, the black students on campus. If you were an African American student on campus, it was over a 90% chance that you were deeply engaged with the Black Student Association. Not everybody was best friends, but that was just what you did and it meant something. Certainly we had people involved in a whole myriad of things, but Black Student Association was something that was taken very seriously and it was a routine check-in for students of color to connect and in some ways to, it was good training to be around black students who had diverse interests

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and skills and personalities as well. I think it helped us recognize that sometimes what we have in common doesn't extend beyond the fact that we're all considered African Americans and then the differences started showing up. So it was probably good practice for many of us to do that.

Jones: Are there any memories that stood out from this time? Any events that you had at BSA that just really stood out or any conversations with alumni that really changed you or influenced you in any way?

Wigginton: I remember two in particular. One was Maxine Smith, the legendary Civil Rights leader in Memphis. She came to campus. She was secretary of the NAACP for many years here and she came to recruit Rhodes students to be members of the NAACP student membership. It was a

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really powerful statement for her to come to Rhodes because we did not have a lot of students of color, but she valued, respected this institution. She knew the type of students who had come



here and graduated from here. She was a very busy woman with a very high profile, but she thought enough of us to come to one of our meetings and not only encourage us to be members of the NAACP, but also encourage us to reach our full potential academically, civically, and be social justice advocates. The other was the first Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday that was recognized was during the time in which I was Black Student Association President. It was a

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really big deal. Keep in mind the country's having national conversations about it and the legitimacy of it and that sort of thing. I thought it was important enough, and as did my peers, that we needed to make a certain statement about that first holiday. I got a chance to sort of set up the first event on that holiday. I had certainly the help of others, but as the President it was my job to emphasize that, or put the emphasis on it that I thought it deserved and choose the speaker and develop a program around that. We actually held it right in front of the Refectory. You had to choose to walk by the event to go into the Refectory. We knew it would be noticed if you didn't stop and acknowledge. We were borderline strategic then, too.

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It was a pretty powerful moment because not everybody had bought into, if you will, the idea of having a holiday named for Dr. King.

Threatt: So I'm just wondering if there's a spectrum or a shift while you were at Rhodes because first you were, I think, more social than civically engaged, but when you became President of BSA and with the background that you already had of your mother being very involved and then after Maxine Smith came, did you experience, "I think I wanna do more Memphis." Already you're planning more as BSA President. Did that translate to you going out into the community more?

Wigginton: Absolutely, yeah. Some of the things we did as a Black Student Association were much more community-oriented and I got a chance to be exposed to leadership at the other schools and all of that. I was always

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conscious about and felt responsibility to be an advocate or activist to some extent from a social justice standpoint. So that was already rooted into my upbringing. I recall that one of the big decisions my dad had to make was going to Freedom Summer or not or taking a job, right. I had grown up with these kinds of stories so I felt a sense of responsibility and I think one of the things that really motivated me in some ways, probably, to stop playing basketball is because I was feeling disappointed in myself from the standpoint of not being as engaged in beyond the social sphere as I should be. I was conscious of it the whole time.

Threatt: And did your dad go to Freedom Summer instead of taking the job?

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What did he do? If you don't mind me asking.

Wigginton: No he did not. He did not and it was the kind of question that I think a lot of people at a place like Howard dealt with. He was at Howard with Stokely Carmichael. They spent time together, they knew each other, they had many conversations about, "Are you going or not?" Right? And so there were a lot of African American Howard graduates who had that struggle, right, I mean, do you take this first wave of true corporate great jobs out of college or do you go to Freedom Summer and see what happens, right? Keep in mind, we have the lenses now which we look back and have an image of that, but at the time who knew what would happen and how it would happen and how it would be received and all of that. But I got a chance to hear about that growing up and just

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think about the kind of choices that you often have.

Jones: Now we're going to talk about your time here as a professor. So you have a Bachelor's and Doctorate in History, am I correct?

Wigginton: That is correct.

Jones: Ok. How did you decide to-

Wigginton: Magne cum lucky, by the way.

Jones: That was good, I like that. Ok. How did you decide to pursue it as an academic career? What about it motivated you to seek a graduate degree in the field and return to Rhodes as a History professor?

Wigginton: Sure. I'd love to be able to tell you that there was a master plan, but that would be false. I majored in History- I came to that major pretty late in my academic career, relatively speaking. And it had a lot to do with, I would still say like a lot of our students choose their major. It has a lot to do with the professors you connect with.

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Who give meaning to work and disciplines to us. I happened to have the privilege of studying under our first named Chair tenured African American professor named, it's Dennis Dickerson. He'd come from Williams College and he was only here for a couple years. He left and went back to Williams and now he's a professor at Vanderbilt, so we've stayed in touch. He made History and sort of the possibilities of being a History major come to life for me. He was a very encouraging for me to know that even though I saw myself pursuing a sales or marketing kind of career initially after college. That's in fact what I did. I worked in sales and marketing the first four or five years out of

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college. I was fortunate enough to take advantage of some of that experience I got as a marketing internship, paid internship while I was here and taking a lot of business classes. We didn't have minors at Rhodes College back then. But I took a lot of business classes here. I was able to do what I thought I wanted to do. It served as a great foundation for me to think about how to interact with people, how to work with others, how to be a part of the team, a lot of things that you're doing early in your career. I lived in four cities in four years in that role, which was a good thing early in your career when you're with a company like that 'cause that means you're getting promoted. So I lived in Boston, Massachusetts when I made the decision that I would go to graduate school. Prior to that I had lived in Youngstown,

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Ohio for a little while and that's when I studied for and took the GRE and did all that stuff, but I had to make the ultimate decision when I was living in Boston. What I found is, you know, this notion of being a lifelong learner here at Rhodes, it's actually, it's real. I missed school so badly. I missed learning. I had never missed school before. You couldn't have convinced me that I was gonna miss school. But it was really about- I didn't feel the intellectual engagement and nourishment that I needed. It was a little frightening because here I was, in my mid-20's, with a really good job, a company car, seeing the country in some interesting ways on an expense account,

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and I'm gonna go back and be a graduate student in History to do what? Honestly, my sole focus and motivation was, I felt I owed it to myself to do everything I could to reach my academic intellectual full potential. I didn't even think about it past that. I didn't think about what job it was gonna lead to, I didn't think about any of that. I said, this is for me. So I encourage students even today, if you're gonna pursue post-graduate education, if your sole or your highest priority is not you're doing this for you and your desire to do that, I'm not sure you're ready to go yet. It may sound naïve

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and foolish on one hand, but it served as a great motivation for me to work really hard. I had a little chip on my shoulder. I also had given up- I was thinking every month how much money I didn't make and how much I was spending. I was a little older; I had a little more pragmatic approach, probably, from that standpoint. So I was focused. Went to University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I was focused on trying to go to a top 20 graduate program and I was lucky enough to slide in the back door and get in. I worked hard and I did well and opportunities came my way. I got a chance to teach early and actually serve as a TA, but then also actually teach a course. African American Studies program. That was really

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exciting for me. I enjoyed it tremendously. It made me begin to think about a potential career in academia. Although I was by no way, in no way convinced that I would do that for very long, if at all. My dream job at the time was, keep in mind I study African American and African American labor and community history, I wanted to be Whitney Young. I wanted a Ph.D. in History and I was gonna go to work for the National Urban League and I was going to be Whitney Young's protégé. I wanted to lead a national Civil Rights organization through the lens of labor, jobs, economic justice, and opportunity. As I was getting ready to work on my dissertation, got a call from Rhodes College asking if I would be interested in this fellowship.

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Politely declined. Just didn't see coming back to Rhodes in that capacity. Just didn't see that as that much of an option for me. Got another call later and was interested enough to at least visit and consider and in doing so found myself connecting with the college in a way that I didn't envision coming back and connecting with Memphis in a way. So I accepted the fellowship and got a chance to work on my dissertation and teach a class a semester, which ended up serving as a great introduction to what it would mean to work here as a professor. That opportunity allowed me to

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transition into a full-time teaching position after the fellowship for a couple years and decided to pursue that for a while. Never really saw myself, at any point, despite really enjoying being in the classroom, never full embraced the idea of spending my career as a professor, if I were going to stay in academia. So I did get the opportunity to do some other things upon the arrival of Dr. Troutt.

Threatt: Great, so you're already talking about how you got back to Rhodes. When you got back, how many years had passed between since when you graduated and you coming back as a professor?

Wigginton: Eight.

Threatt: Eight. So, coming back as a faculty member,

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well, post-doc, 'cause-

Wigginton: Yeah, I was a fellow for two years.

Threatt: As an affiliated faculty, sort of, right?

W: Yeah, I mean I was- From a student standpoint I was a faculty member, but I wasn't a Ph.D. yet.

Threatt: Ok. So coming back as part of the faculty as opposed to a student, how had Rhodes changed in eight years and how did you find it different? Because what was the demographic of the faculty?

W: The demographic of the faculty had changed very little, if at all, essentially. The college had changed in a couple ways. We had a fence now. We had a few more buildings that were at least, if not there or underway. Actually a couple more that were there. I think when I left the faculty I'm not sure there were any African American faculty and when I came back there was one.

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From a student demographic standpoint it was probably, potentially fewer students of color than when I had left. Definitely not a higher percentage. I was struggling with that, but I also saw- I spent a little time thinking about what Dennis Dickerson had meant to me, and not that I would in any way compare myself to Dennis Dickerson, but I felt like my presence, particularly in the same area that he was in, might be meaningful for students. Not even just the students of color, but students in general. I kind of made a decision that I could either try this out and potentially be a part of some solutions or I can be a

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disgruntled alum and talk about, "Rhodes College isn't progressing." And I chose the former.

Threatt: Even though you chose the former, I'm interested into what specific challenges you may have found in being one of- so there were only two black faculty members at the time?

Wigginton: Well, actually after the first year that one left and myself and Dr. Anita Davis were the two. And then Luther Ivory came that year. We used to have, Anita Davis and I used to joke that we could be sitting around having dinner and we could describe it as a black faculty senate conversation. If she and I voted to do a certain thing, we could outvote Luther if he disagreed so we can make all the decisions, right.

Threatt: So there's three of you and I assume you got to be pretty close.

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Wigginton: Absolutely.

Threatt: I don't know if you know what challenges they might have faced, but as a small collective, what challenges might you all have faced?

Wigginton: No we were all very close. Anita Davis and I were married at the time, so we were closer in another way, but the three of us spent a lot of time talking about both from just a general day-to-day support standpoint, but really talking about possibilities. None of us are the type that- We're more asset-based than deficit-based kind of people. There wasn't a lot of wallowing going on. There was a, "If we're here, we see what some challenges are, what are we

gonna do about it? What buttons are we gonna push? What people are we gonna push? What policies are we gonna push?"

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To make Rhodes College think about, or help Rhodes College think about what the future could hold. We just really went about the work in a pretty strategic way and we were fortunate, I think, that all three of us- We had different styles and personalities, but shared common principles. So we could work collectively and individually and it'd be in concert, if that makes sense.

Jones: Can you speak a little about what change you guys brought as a team? You said you brought assets to the table, so how did you focus on the positives and get the administration to change things?

Wigginton: Well, I would even say more than just the Administration. Maybe because I'm sensitive to that 'cause I'm an Administrator

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now. I don't think that the Administration drives all of what happens on this campus. It never has. Keep in mind, two of the three of us were alums, right, so we had easy access to the alum community so we were able to reach out to our network of alum friends. Anita and Luther are both from Memphis, right, so they had networks and access to folk in Memphis who could be thought partners. We were all teachers, so we had access to students and faculty. We didn't spend a whole lot of time talking to the Administration, quite frankly, early on. I would consider even true today, if you talk about all those networks, if you can find the linkages there, the Administration

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is going to follow. That's pretty much what happened. We spent a lot of time talking to the students, we spent a lot of time talking to our colleagues on the faculty, we talked to alums, we talked to members of the community and got their perceptions about things and we sort of prioritized what are some major, what are the top three or four major efforts that need to be embarked upon for Rhodes to look and feel and be different. We went about the work of doing that.

Threatt: Are there any memories – good, bad, other – that stand out to you and your time as a faculty member?

Wigginton: Oh, yeah. I have a lot of those. Mostly good. A few not so good. Overwhelming majority were good. I cherished the relationships

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I had the opportunity to build with students as a faculty member and many of those have been maintained over the years. Some of those former students have actually become great friends and people who, and peers in certain ways. I enjoyed the getting at least aware of and a part of faculty life. I found that it was not fulfilling enough for me, for what I needed. It was much less- I found myself thinking about things in much more institutional ways versus, say, departmental ways. Occasionally that would cause frustration for me because I didn't sense or see

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evidence of enough of my colleagues, our collective thinking about, sort of, the Institution. But, people certainly cared about the institution. Our faculty cared deeply about this institution, but we weren't putting our energies and efforts towards solving institutional problems or institutional challenges in the same way that I wanted to. So that was- Some of the frustration came from there. By this time, shortly after, I figured out pretty early if I was going to be here happily and even as a faculty member, if I had some frustrations with the administration, rather than fuss about them with my peers, I just went to those offices and talked to the person. We aren't that big. I mean, the term "the Administration,"

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I understand why it's used, but it's not that many people, honestly. Particularly once you identify who's in charge of that division. I just went and talked to them and shared my thoughts, concerns, frustrations with them. And felt like, if I can't be heard in this context, then this probably isn't going to be the place for me. But it rarely happened that I wasn't heard. In fact, I always felt like I was heard. I'm not sure everything I said got acted upon as quickly as I wanted it to, but I never felt like I was being placated in any way.

Threatt: So, as we're transitioning into your role and to how you had a relationship with administration, what was the process, I guess, of you shifting from faculty to administration and how did that- did that change your relationship to Dr. Ivory and Dr. Davis and what was the demographic of

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the administration?

Wigginton: Sure. So, while I was a faculty member one of the things that had to happen for me to be satisfied was that I had to be engaged in Memphis. Much like my time as a student, if I didn't have that Memphis involvement, that claustrophobia could return. I came in 1996, came back in 1996. Dr. Troutt came in 1999 and as part of his first year he spent time in Memphis getting to know people and by the end of that year he asked me to chair a committee, an ad hoc community on campus-community partnerships. I'm pretty sure I was the only junior faculty member who got asked to do that, so I took it seriously and I was pretty proud to have been asked and we came back

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with some solutions, or some suggestions, that became part of his focus, right, when you look at the vision of the college that he laid out and the imperatives, one of them was to be engaged and more deeply involved in Memphis. At that point, he asked me if I would be interested in serving as his special assistant for community relations for him and maintain my faculty status. I gladly accepted and we did that for about a year and then he said, "Would you like to do that full-time?" That was a bigger question because that meant I would give up my tenure track faculty line and I was post-third year review and poised to earn tenure in a couple years. So I had to do some soul searching about that and I decided to take that opportunity 'cause I did feel very strongly that

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my future in higher education was going to be in administrative work versus a full and long faculty career. So, I did that for a year full-time. I think that following year he asked me to be a Vice President and that would've been in about 2006. Five or six by that point. I'd been in a version of the role that I'm in now for the last 11 or so years.

Threatt: Did your relationship to Dr. Ivory and Dr. Davis \*have that\*-

Wigginton: Yeah I wouldn't say that it changed.

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I think one of the things that happened is it allowed us to think more strategically and be able to act upon some of the things we had talked about and had identified as goals. One of them was, for example, the establishment of an African American Studies. At the time it was called Interdisciplinary Program. So I'm already in administration, I was asked to chair the founding committee and establish that. That was really rewarding because in doing so it allowed us to bring in faculty from multiple disciplines. It allowed us and, I guess a little bit, me and given my role to have a more intentional and heard voice

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around the recruitment of more faculty of color. It allowed us to change and be more, revise our methodology for how we recruited students. So we start seeing tremendous growth in the number of students of color in some unprecedented and unbelievable ways now that I think about it. Things that have become more common place now, it was dramatic at the time. I was able to capitalize on their wisdom and thinking and initiatives and make sure that those topics were heard loud and clear by senior staff. I wouldn't say our relationship changed, but our ability to execute on some things that we identified

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probably increased as a byproduct of me being in senior administration, but keep in mind along the way they're gaining more time and experience and respect and closer to tenure and then ultimately tenure, too. So their voice is getting louder as well.



Threatt: You've been touching on it throughout the entire interview that you've been steadily taking on leadership roles during your time with the college and you're currently on a lot of committees in this city or have been on lots of committees. I feel like I see you everywhere.

Wigginton: Yep.

Threatt: So, is there a connection to your role as an administrator and you having always wanted to be a part of the community and the college. Is there a correlation between that and the amount of committees you're on?

Wigginton: Absolutely, there's a direct correlation. You know, I feel

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very lucky and fortunate and blessed and all the other positives you can imagine to have been able to serve the college in the roles that I've served. And it also \*[INAUDIBLE]\* so connected to some personal fulfillment. Not everybody gets a chance for their personal and professional to merge as often as I do or as I have historically. So there was definite intentionality early on. When I was first special assistant to the President for community relations, part of my job was to engage and identify potentially strategic partners in Memphis that could help the college and, frankly, the college could help them. So I spent a lot of time in the community and being on numerous boards that would help strengthen and tighten the relationship between the college and them, getting connected with those board members who could

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Be philanthropic partners and donors for the college, the establishment of internships and opportunities between the college and those organizations. So it was very intentional and I can say that in almost every case, these organizations also fulfilled something for me personally. So, I've been on a lot of boards for arts organizations, for example. Well I have a strong interest and desire to be a part of the arts community and I think about the arts and cultural organizations in town as being vital to Memphis' vibrancy. So to be able to assist and be a part of that has been important. Some of the premiere nonprofits in Memphis that do extremely important and valuable work in this city, being on those board. Some of the more, quote unquote, prestigious boards that are helping

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lead and guide the city, I've been fortunate to be on some of those. It's sort of a combination with my personal desires, if you will, but also direct linkage back to how the college benefits and how the city benefits from Rhodes' presence here.

Threatt: Is that how you sort of met and linked up with the Civil Rights Museum and D'Army Bailey during your...

Wigginton: Yes, that's a little bit of how that happened, yes. So I was interested in the Civil Rights Museum back when I was teaching Civil Rights History at Rhodes, so I got connected with them early on in that regard and as I moved into administration the idea of me being involved from a more board level opportunity came about. But I knew D'Army Bailey separate. His wife Adrienne used to work at the college. She worked in Student Affairs

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when I was a student, so I knew D'Army Bailey from my days as a student and, again, as one of those wonderful opportunities as a student I got, some of my colleagues here used to babysit their sons and they lived right over on West Drive and so, when you're a college student and a prominent lawyer invites you over to his house to babysit his kids and they're going to pay you and feed you and it's in walking distance... I mean they only had two sons, but oftentimes there'd be like five of us going over there. What that did is it gave me exposure to this guy and hear his stories and benefit from his wisdom and his historic value to the Civil Rights Museum. So I had that already and so

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it was easy to reach out to him. And I had invited him to guest lecture at my Civil Rights classes and stuff before so that was an easy relationship. He's always been a person who- he had very much some visionary tendencies. And so he just shared with me one day that, "I like some of the things Rhodes College is doing. Given your liberal arts and liberal arts value-base, you'd be a great organization, a great institution in which to help this city come to terms with its Civil Rights legacy. You guys could do it in a way that some other places could not. And you oughta think about how you want to capture some stories and some understanding about that as part of Memphis' quest." And that really resonated with me

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and so, thought about, ironically, thought about access to his personal papers and his archive, if you will. He was still very much involved with what he was doing at that time and wasn't ready to have those things housed anywhere, but continued to engage in conversations about how that could unfold for us as an institution. So, was both naïve enough and perhaps even bold enough to think that this could be an avenue by which we could get philanthropy, we could provide opportunities for students, and we could be doing something that could ultimately be to the benefit of this city and thank goodness early on our efforts were met with enthusiasm and we got a chance to embark on this, now,

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decade-long journey.

Threatt: Where did the name Crossroads to Freedom come from?

Wigginton: Several of us at the college came up on that name and had some community conversations about it. What we were really trying to do was think about this being the intersection, Rhodes and this project being the intersection, if you will, of so many pieces to the college's, the city's, and the number of individuals', and the archives' or collections' puzzle, right? Some of those things were met with contradiction, right, so we wanted to leave room for interpretation and people to understand that, you know, when you're at the crossroads it can mean a lot of different things, right, it can mean some good, some not so good. But you're meeting

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in a certain kind of way. We thought about the freedom part because we really felt like, from a city standpoint, that we had not for sure, at that time, as a city collectively recognized our possibilities and come to terms with our vulnerabilities and that we didn't always have to be restricted or hindered by them. So we thought about, yeah so when you get free, you allow yourself to be vibrant, to be visionary, to be vulnerable, a lot of different things. We arrived at the name through a process where those were the things that emerged.

Threatt: And what would you

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say, and you sort of already touched on it, but what would you say more explicitly was or is the mission of Crossroads and has it evolved or changed, do you think since its inception?

Wigginton: So I think it's evolved a little bit, as it should, and that was part of the intent, but there are some core principles that haven't really changed and those are, we want this to be a collection that is not fully interpreted or led by an interpretation from the college. It was a pretty bold direction to take. I'll be perfectly honest, I was non-negotiable on it. If we weren't willing to do that as a college I would not have led the work. I felt like, for this to be what I and others envisioned, we had to

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leave some vulnerability for us if we expected others to be vulnerable. If we went about the business of interpreting everything and providing the expert opinion and putting that out as the way it is, I felt like that was- that has value, but that was not where we could contribute the most. Keeping in mind, we had the whole expectation that we would hear from all different types of people with all different types of stories. Right? And so that was another principle. We want to hear from the Civil Rights leaders and the folk who were in their neighborhood not actively pursuing an activist role, right, and everybody in between. We wanted to be vulnerable and open and available and flexible in those ways.

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We also wanted this to be student-focused. It was always set up to where students would guide and drive and contribute to this work in a meaningful way, such that the college was the beneficiary, but the students were touched in a way that then would influence them and who they are and who they became. We also wanted it to be community-focused. We didn't want it to be done in a way that wasn't approachable and available to a broad swath of people in this community. We didn't need for it to be overly intellectual, but provide rich content by which you can engage it at the level in which you felt comfortable. Those were some pieces that were in place at the beginning that I would still say

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are in place. Some of the differences are, with maturation comes different years or different groups of years where you highlight things differently. You may focus on neighborhoods, you may focus on individuals, you may focus on certain types of stories, you may focus on different types of collections. We wanted that to happen and be part of this process, 'cause we felt like ultimately for this collection to be relevant 20 years from now, you've got to keep it fresh, you've got to be willing to step into a variety of spaces and be opportunistic.

Threatt: Speaking of opportunity, I know we're running up against time, but do you want to tell the story of building up the archives of Crossroads and the infancy of it

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and your fieldtrip to Brownsville to get the Klan documents?

Wigginton: Oh, sure, I'll tell that real quickly. When you set a stage that allows you to be flexible and opportunistic, you can indeed act upon it. We were getting some traction and some momentum in the city and people began to look at us as a place where archival collections- We would be open to a wide variety of archival collections and some folks reach out to us and let us know that this collection of Klan materials were being auctioned off in Brownsville by the head of the Klan for Tennessee. My colleague Bob Johnson and I decided to take a drive over to see what this collection was all about. We knew it would be a little controversial, to add a

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collection like that to, essentially, a Civil Rights struggle collection. But we felt like, this is part of the Civil Rights struggle and how interesting would it be to have primary source documents that, in some cases, make it real for people, the impact and power and threat of an organization like the Ku Klux Klan. So we made that trip. We were met with, at a minimum, curiosity, and a maximum, probably fear and angst, right? We just started buying stuff not even fully understanding all that we had, but we had received some grants that gave us some fiscal flexibility in which to buy materials and we just bought up all the stuff that we thought would be relevant to what we were trying to do and

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we raised some eyebrows while we were there. I think ultimately it gave us another \*[INAUDIBLE]\* and respect by the archive community, locally and nationally, that, “They’re serious about this. They’re not scared, they’re willing to take some calculated risk, they’re going for it.” I feel like this archive has been a great opportunity for us to meet some college goals, but also a very unique way in which we can demonstrate how deeply engaged and invested we are in this community. It’s something that has the possibilities of being sustained for years to come and still flexible enough to take some twists and turns that we probably haven’t thought about yet.

Threatt: Are there any closing statements,

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stories, musings about Crossroads, specifically, that you wanna-

Wigginton: Yeah, I would say, for me, it’s been, without question, one of the personal highlights of my professional career. Just to be able to take an idea with the assistance of people, like Dr. Bonefas and Dr. Bob Johnson and others, to take an idea and actually make it come to life and have it hit on a lot of the tentacles that the college values and cares about and sustain it for the decade that it has been. Maybe more important than that is the, in this decade anniversary, to be able to hear from students who were involved with it early on and hear how

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they talk about it now, what it means to them now, what it meant to them then. I think there’s a richness there that reminds us all, certainly reminds me, of why we embarked on this far-flung enterprise to begin with. ‘Cause we didn’t have any money, we didn’t have any infrastructure, we didn’t really have any hard belief to know that it could be successful. But we were able to convince enough people in all those areas to support it and I think there’s some directions we’ve yet to go that allow us to almost embark on that journey again for the next decade. So I’m really proud of the fact that it’s something that’s a part of the college now in a meaningful way

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and people don’t ask me anymore whether or not this project’s gonna make it or not. I’m really glad I don’t have to answer that question anymore.

Threatt: Ok, so we’re gonna go towards the closing now in respect of your time. So you’ve been at Rhodes through many stages of the college’s development and your own personal professional development. What are the major shifts that you’ve noticed, be it campus culture, climate, your own personal perspective on it all?

Wigginton: Yeah, I would say that- So in my time here I’ve been back at Rhodes since 1996 so this is 21 years. I would say some of the major differences are we are a much more national college than we’ve ever been. Students come from everywhere and they didn’t 21 years ago. We are much more geographically, racially, ethnically diverse than we’ve ever been.

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I mean, you just have no idea compared to 21 years ago. It's dramatic. From a student body, a staff, and a faculty context. We also live in this amazingly interesting time in which our country and higher education is not as civil as it used to be. We don't engage in the kind of discourse that we used to around tough and challenging issues. It's very divided and it's getting lived out on college campuses and this shouldn't surprise anybody. And so our work is harder, but it also means more now because we still have an obligation to teach that, to model that, and to require

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the kind of discourse that's going to ultimately win the day. Yeah, that makes campus culture different, challenging, but I would also say, I feel like it was gonna be that way anyway. I mean it wasn't that challenging in 1996 because we weren't at a tipping point in any of those categories. We weren't at a geographic tipping point, racial and ethnic tipping point, and societal discourse tipping point. Well we're in a tipping point in all four of those ways now, so when people are struggling and worried and concerned with the campus culture and climate, I don't want to diminish those things for them, but when you think about it the way I think about it, my response is, "Well how else could we not be unsettled most of the time?"

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We're in a moment that's unsettling and I think if we- We should seek and aspire for us to be more settled, but to think that- If it happens too quickly and too easily it's probably, it's deceptive. It's probably not really there. A question I'm still asking is, so what does the campus climate and culture that we- What does it look like? That we desire. So how does that play out if we were to imagine we're in a much better place in that regard and I do think there's room and places and space in which to do so. What does success look like? I don't think we've fully answered that question.

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I think that's part of the journey. You gotta know what success looks like because you're gonna have to hit some benchmarks along the way and you're gonna have to celebrate and relish in those moments where you are making progress. Because it's hard work and if you don't think about some moments of accomplishment, it's relentless work, it's relentless work and you're gonna burn out. So you've got to think about the work through those lenses if we're going to be able to execute on what our hopes and dreams are and be able to sustain that. I'm actually excited about it. I think we are positioned at this college in some very unique ways. Last time I checked we're in Memphis, Tennessee, which hadn't figured out much yet either. Not only

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do we have a chance to figure some things out on this campus, but we have a chance to take a leadership role in how this community figures some things out. There aren't that many colleges like ours in this country that can say they have the same opportunity. It's daunting, but I'd rather

be faced with that kind of opportunity than not. 'Cause I think at the end or by the end, we'll deliver and it's gonna be one step forward and two steps back, but if everybody understands that's how it's gonna work it's gonna be much easier to digest and persevere. I'm excited about it. I'll have some moments of frustration like everybody else, but I can't imagine a place that is better positioned to lead out in important ways that we are at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.

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Threat: Is there anything else that you want to touch on from any of the sections that we've talked about or any closing thoughts you want to share?

Wigginton: I think I would just want to add that it's important to think about this archive, this project, in the context of this college and to not underestimate how, maybe in some subtle ways, it has played an important role of how this college has developed and unfolded over the last 10 years. I think this archive gives us a platform by which we will be able to have and lead and generate some conversations and questions for the future. As more schools begin to take on projects like this,

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the fact that we're a decade in is going to play to our advantage, so I'm excited about thinking about how that unfolds in the future.

Threatt: If we asked you, who would you suggest that we interview next for the archive? Curveball.

Wigginton: So I think there's some alums, particularly some of the alums who were either some of the early African American students or others who were students here during that era, that I think could offer a unique perspective on Memphis and the college at that time. I would, and I'd be happy to help with that, but I would go back and look at, say, the first three or four years in which African American students were here and make sure I've at least touched on those who are available to see if they would do an interview.

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Threatt: Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom project.

Wigginton: Thank you.

[END]

