Date: 2017-07-11

Interviewee: Regina Walker

Interviewer: Brittney Threatt

Location: Rhodes College, Memphis, TN

Collection: Social Justice in Memphis, Memphis Black Leaders Oral Histories

Notes:

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Brittney Threatt: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom Rhodes College I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Brittney Threatt, a Class of 2017 graduate of Rhodes College and I'm honored to be with you and learn about your work in the city through the years and your integral part in building up programs of empowerment for the community. It is July 11th, 2017 and we are currently in Barret Library at Rhodes College. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. So we like to start out Crossroads interviews with some introductions and background for context. Can you please state your name and current occupation using the full title?

Regina Walker: Regina Walker, and I am the Principal and CEO of RD Walker and Associates, LLC.

Threatt: Is that your only job?

Walker: No. It is not.

Threatt: Would it be tedious for you to list all of your jobs?

Walker: Girl, if you only knew. And I'm still very active on Board of Directors. But, most of my paid work comes through my LLC and I work with different institutions.

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Threatt: Okay. Well, we'll just go with that. The rest will just come out in your interview. So, what year were you born?

Walker: 1955

Threatt: Okay. Where did you grow up? Please describe your childhood community.

Walker: Well, I grew up in Sharpsburg, North Carolina.

Threatt: Okay.

Walker: And that's a little old town that's between *Rocky Mount and Wilson*, and most people have never heard of Sharpsburg, North Carolina. And I lived in a very- I won't call it stress, but

on one side of the railroad tracks were the black families. On the other side of the railroad tracks were white families. And so there were differences. I grew up on dirt roads before they were paved, but I learned quite a bit. That was my learning opportunity, my learning environment and it really shaped who I am. We didn't realize we were poor, especially as kids. Now, our parents probably felt it far more than we did as children. And that was my explore time,

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for me to learn. And folks would say by the time I could learn to walk I was out of the door roaming. And that's the beauty of our childhood back then. Even though racism was very rampant, but as children we never experienced it. And we could go anywhere in that little neighborhood, in the woods, down to dirt roads further, and we were all safe. And, so, it's unfortunate that our children cannot have the same kinds of experiences today. And I experienced the "puttin' in tobacco" as we say, and the picking cotton even though I was the youngest. You know, of my siblings, but I was still out there and I'm glad I had that experience because it's a part of our history, it's a part of the past, and it helped me to know what our families endured, and then how racism still occurred because my uncle was a sharecropper. And we would talk with him, especially with my children as they got older.

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Especially my youngest daughter, because she started recording their stories, so now I'm waiting for her to start writing it. You know, what they experienced as adults and the challenges that they had, and their audacity to speak up to whites about what they felt was unfair, but as a sharecropper, I tell you that was another play area. He raised pigs, he raised cows, and he did quite a deal of farming. But again, that was a play haven for us. The corn to feed the cows and the pigs- it was in barns. And we would go as kids in those barns, jumping up and down in the corn, not realizing we could have suffered and just sunk on down. But it was like those little places now where you jump into the plastic balls, well we had that in those barns. And then when it's time for our family reunions we would generally have it there

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on the land that my uncle was a sharecropper, and I recall as a kid the hog killing, and so he'd shoot this big hog. The hog runs around until it no longer had its breath. And then my uncle would clean the hog out and hang him up on the side of the barn, you know to do further cleaning. What you can get out, and you know let it just dry for a while. Then he had this very big hole in the ground. And he would put a bed spring over- He would put wood in it and the bed spring. And that's where he would lay the hog to have it- Not unlike what we do today. We have all these gadgets, but that was good meat as far as I was concerned. It was just a wonderful opportunity, any kind of food you could think about. There was a brook that went through the land that he was farming, and you know we just played in it. That is the perfect place for a child to grow up.

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Again, we had no understanding of what racism was about, and the struggles that our parents had to go through, but it was a great experience for us as children. I'm not ashamed of my background. I tell people today, "I'm a country girl." And I'm proud of the fact that I'm a country girl. And I did have those experiences as a child, and I must say that community, just growing up, women were the decision makers. They basically- My mother was a single mother, raised all four of us, and, I mean, that's all I knew. Women as leaders. And our house was one of those major houses. That's where the community conversations occurred. And the adults would be sitting 'round the table, doing their talk, doing all that kind of stuff, and I always wanted to be a part of it. I mean, I had the opportunity to explore, and to be a part of, and nobody else said, "Girl you need to go on outside with those other chil'ren," is the way they would say it.

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And they allowed me to become a part of the discussions. And I walked away many times crying because I felt hurt because they talked to me like I was an adult. "You wanna be a part of it? Okay, you're a part of it." But what it eventually taught me is over time, and I'm reflecting back on that and who I was becoming, is that whenever you're gonnna sit down and have a conversation with someone, be prepared to defend your position. You go at the conversation that way. But, what I learned as I got older, knowing how to defend my position was interpreted in a different way because I'm seeking to understand and to learn what you're saying, so I'm gonna consistently ask questions, and I'm thinking that you're gonna defend your position, and maybe I shouldn't say defend, but you would offer clarity about what you're talking about, your first introduction of your position and why do you believe that, and if there's any evidence that you have. And I'm using horrible words now

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Because those are words that were not used then. But, just defend it. So I learned that from the adults sitting around the table having their talks, every weekend and then the other greatest joy, I have to say, experience- juke joints. There was a juke joint right across the street from where I lived. And I used to sneak out at night. My older siblings gone to hang out with their folks, and my mom's asleep. And to peek in the window of the juke joints.

Threatt: How old were you?

Walker: I was about six or seven when I started going out and peeping in the juke joint. I knew they were there. And sometimes if it's at night, and we're all sitting outside, you could pretty much see what's going on, but not the way you could see it when you go peep in the window. And so, I saw some interesting things as a kid. So, I had a perfect childhood as far as I was concerned, but I really have to commend my mom for being the strong woman that she was, and I always say she's one of the original warrior women.

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To have to endure what she had to endure as a black woman, and as a single mother raising us. And our father did not have that daddy thing going on with him, but he never denied us. He also made sure that we had what we had, and if he didn't, my mother was after him. 'Cause I heard the

story- My oldest sister told me this story about my mom. When the Negro League would be coming through- He was out there. This was before I was born. And so she would grab her three kids, take them up there to where the baseball game's going, and call him out in front of everybody. "You didn't do this, and you said-," but, you know, she spoke her piece. She lived her life, and she made sure we had what we needed to have. We had the basics, we had the food, we had the clothing, and we had the discipline, and we had to go to church.

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You know, church was only the first Sunday. It wasn't like it is today. You know, every Sunday you go to church. On Sundays we could only listen to spiritual music on the radio. So I just have great memories about it. I remember the doctor that she took me to primarily, and I'm assuming it was for my older siblings, too, I remember the white only signs and the black signs, around the bathrooms or where the water fountains were. But again, that meant nothing to me at all. You know, I'm just with my mom going to the doctor. So, it was very unique. And I would jokingly tell people when I was born in Sharpsburg population was probably maybe about thirty or fifty, and today, population's about two-hundred and fifty, so they had a population explosion. I say that jokingly. Because today, expansion has occurred. So on the one side of the railroad track, black folks had now moved to the other side

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of the railroad track. So, it's an interesting story. I'm proud of what my uncle achieved. He was a major politician for that little town. Very well-respected. He spoke up for what he thought were disparity, differences in practices and the way government was operating. And so I'm just proud of the achievements.

Threatt: And what was your uncle's name?

Walker: His name was James Walker.

Threat: James Walker.

Walker: Mhmm.

Threatt: You said you really didn't notice race when you were young. You said you were in this very pastoral, beautiful country place, but can you recall anything as an adult looking back where because your family was so outspoken and stood up for their rights that you might have seen a consequence that you didn't realize was a consequence?

Walker; The only- I never saw it in North Carolina. The only time I saw it was when our family moved to Virginia.

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And my mother and I were downtown Portsmith. She was learning her way around, and she unfortunately turned down a one-way street. And there was a white women coming towards her calling my mother all kinds of Niggers. That was the first thing that I started- Mmm, there's something interesting here about that. Nigger. And that's when I was older. I was twelve. And so,

I was being exposed to more, especially when I moved to Virginia. You know, that's a urban area versus to the country where I lived. So that was my only real exposure to what racism is about. And the other thing about moving to Virginia for me is that, realizing that I was different than the kids and the families in the neighborhood where we lived. We moved to Cumberland Manor. Let me digress a little bit. My oldest sister was married to- His name was Roscoe

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and he was in Vietnam. And he died in Vietnam. And I remember that day specifically in North Carolina when the military came to the house where we lived, knocking on the door, and I was out playing around, and I remember my sister falling, so she must've fainted. Here's the other thing that says a lot about my sister, my older sister, 'cause she was in essence the mother of everybody anyway. She decided to pack all of us up to- A brother, another sister, and me, and my mom. And bought a- She said, "Well, we had planned to move to Virginia so I'm still gonna do it." And so I think that was another key moment in my life. 'Cause I think about if I had stayed in North Carolina, what would have been my destiny? Versus with her bringing us to Virginia, exposed. Getting back to realizing that my family structure was different. Because in that neighborhood Cumberland Manor, which was one of the largest black middle class neighborhoods on the East Coast

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is what I eventually learned is that most of the families there were married. I didn't come from a married household. And, so as kids, we're talking about it and I'm thinking, "Hmm." And I'm so proud of mine. I said, "Well, my mom and dad weren't married." *But I started, oh,* there's a difference here. And I'm sure kids today observe that kind of difference in their communities and what it means. Especially if they have the chance to be exposed to other families as they're growing up. But, that was my first real experience. Something really is different. But here's another funny part. Let me go back to my father, 'cause my father was just, not even one generation from white. His dad was white and his mother was Cherokee. And so my father basically looked white. And my other siblings, they have all these very light eyes and the very long hair, my sisters.

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My hair is not long. It's more kinkier than their hair. And my eyes are, like I said, a little brown. But I got the height, they're short. And then my older sister used to tell me of tales when she would have to walk to a store at the entrance of that neighborhood. And there was a man by the name of- Oh my gosh, I'm forgetting his name- but he was a relative, and he was my brother's father. And he looked white. Totally white. And my sister would say when our mom would send her there to get something- And she never knew that that was her uncle. She said he was such an evil white man, but, she said no matter what she asked for, she always got it. And she said she wondered about that. This evil white man, but every time she was sent to the store to get something, he gave it to her.

Threatt: She didn't pay for it?

Walker: No. A lot of times, it would **represent tools**, some stuff they needed

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to do the gardening or whatever. And she said she wondered about that. She said, "Why did I always get it even though he was just a mean, white man." But she said every time she went to ask, she got. And so, again, one generation away from white and if you see a picture of my great-grandfather, you could see, he looked like a Mormon to me standing by a wagon, with the hair, the beard. So fascinating story, we have not completely done a history, our ancestry piece. My daughter started on it, but on my mother's side, she ran into a challenge. And then, on my father's side, some names were not recorded appropriately as we continued trying to find...So at some point she'll get back to it. And then, what I realized about my father's side, and then my mother-

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My mother, if you had to compare them, they were the working class. On my father's side, they were more the elite, even though they had land and [INAUDIBLE], but they had money. It dawned on me later as I was growing up, we had special privileges by virtue of our, my mom's side, the working class and they had power, too. And then on my father's side, they had money, and tons of land. So here we were. The children of two power families by their own right. So I'm saying, well maybe that's why I had so many opportunities. Because of that privilege. That privilege in that situation way back then, it existed then as it exists today, as privilege exists in our black communities. It still exists.

Threatt: Right. How did that privilege affect things like- So you've already said you would go to a store and because of family connections, you would get what you needed.

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Threatt: How about education, schools? What was the experience there?

Walker: See I didn't experience what my older siblings because I am six years younger than my brother and I'm ten years younger than my oldest sister. So it's ten, eight, six, and then me. I came a while later. Since they were older than me, they had to work in the fields far more often than me. And they told me, they would spend a whole semester out of school because they had to work in the fields. Black kids had to work in the fields. So they spent a lot of time out of school. And my oldest sister all the time says it's amazing how they were able to graduate, all three of them, because they spent half of the year, every year out in the fields. I didn't experience that, again, because I was younger and I was in elementary school, and my sister, like I said she was over by the caretakers. Be careful of being the oldest sometimes. And she was the one. Took care of all of us. And like I said, she brought us all up to Virginia.

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And I say we all did very well. Our siblings, and never paid any rent or- 'Cause she paid for the house in cash. So like I said, that had to me a huge influence on the direction of our lives, and I wonder would I have left North Carolina. What would I have done if I had stayed in a very rural town?

Threatt: Was there a difference in the education system from that more rural context?

Walker: No, it was all still segregated, and the school that we attended, it was first grade all the way up to twelfth grade.

Threatt: In one building?

Walker: In one building.

Threatt: How was that?

Walker: For me as a kid, it was just adventure because the playground didn't have equipment, like swings. So, you had to use your imagination to create your own, and we did that quite often. One significant event I remember,

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and this is when Kennedy was killed, and I remember that day in school, it was so chaotic. I didn't understand really what was going on and the teachers were crying and the school was shut down, and at that time, if you were a high school senior or junior, you were allowed to drive the busses to pick kids up. And my brother was one of the drivers. Back in the day, he drove the school bus to pick up the kids and bring them to school. I remember that day vividly because of all of the emotion that was going on. And I remember as a kid, not really knowing as a child what was really happening, but I remember it was a big event. Frederick Douglass was the school. That was the name. And the school is still in existence.

Threatt: Frederick Douglass School in Virginia? Can we back up to the school bus driving?

Walker: That was in North Carolina. It was called Frederick Douglass, and it was from

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first grade all the way up.

Threatt: Was this a- Can we just back up to the school bus driving just for a second? Is this a job?

Walker: Yes they did. They got paid, they got paid, yes. Because we were in Sharpsburg, and the school was in Elm City, so that had to have been maybe at least five, it could have been 10- I don't remember what the distance was. They picked up- Because all the kids primarily, if you didn't live in Elm City, came from Sharpsburg and maybe another little town that was just right down the street. And we were all there in Sharpsburg so we just got on the bus, and then they picked up all the other kids, and that was an adventure, too. 'Cause we loved the bounces with the busses, everything was an adventure for me as a kid, it really was. So, yeah, they were paid, because my brother was one of them.

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And the other thing that was so fascinating to me- There was a pond, man-made pond on the side of where I lived between our house and the next house, and they stocked it with fish, but the

folks from the church, which was on the white folks side of the railroad track, that's where people were baptized. In that pond.

Threatt: With fish?

Walker: Yeah.

Threatt: Okay cool. Could you fish, and then like take the fish, or did you have to put them back?

Walker: No, no, no. You ate what you caught.

Threatt: Okay.

Walker: I don't recall any rules, but I do remember my brother who was out there fishing with some of his friends. This is not funny, but where he was standing was in a bad place. One of his friends says he did this to throw the hook out in the water, he caught my brother in the nose. I shouldn't be saying that about my brother. But again there was memorable things, things that you just remember as a kid and that thing being stuck in his nose.

Threatt: Oh, no!

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Walker: Yeah, it happened to him. I have some great stories from North Carolina. I have great memories. You know, things that happened there because it was surrounded by woods, trees, and all that. So, my Uncle had a still, and we used to call him *Willybee*.

Threatt: He had a what?

Walker: A still where you make moonshine. Where you make your own whiskey. A still. I'm assuming that's the right name for it. And again, as a roamer, I went through there, playing, because I could have the opportunity. That was the first time somebody'd tell me, "Girl, you need to get out here, go on out of here." But it was fascinating watching this man sitting around the still and seeing the little fire. I'm like, oooh. It was a very learning experience for me, and I cannot complain. And again when they called me up, my uncle, Uncle Jack gave me a nickname, and my nickname was *Didi Boone*.

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Didi because my middle name was *Dineice*. Don't ask me where my mom got that name from. But Dineice. Not Denise, not Darnise, but Dineice. And then Boone because he was fascinated by Daniel Boone. You know, all the shows on TV and Daniel Boon was an explorer. And that's why I got the name Didi Boone, because I was an explorer as a kid in the neighborhood.

Threatt: Could you- 'Cause we're gonna have to do a transcript of this interview- Could you spell that?

Walker: D-I-D-I B-O-O-N-E

Threatt: And can you spell your middle name?

Walker: D-I-N-E-I-C-E, Didi Boone.

Threatt: Okay, you had a very interesting childhood. We could talk about this all day.

Walker: Again, because I was not harnessed from my perspective from what other kids may have experienced even there, during that time period, but I know we all had the opportunity to explore. So, that's why everything was fascinating to me and fun.

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Threatt: So even though you had a more privileged, parented...you weren't playing by yourself? Other people in the neighborhood were playing with you?

Walker: Oh, yeah. Well sometimes I would strike out on my own as an explorer, but a lot of times it was a "us" thing going on.

Threatt: So, moving in to more, your more adult perceptions. To what do you attribute your passion for community involvement and empowerment?

Walker: Well on the side of empowerment, I think, well, two things. One is in the neighborhood where I lived in, in Portsmith because it was a middle-class neighborhood, and I could not understand why the young boys were doing the stupid- You know, my age kids. This is when I was in high school primarily when I started seeing more of the ugliness of the boys in that neighborhood, and now we're in a middle class neighborhood. Now, why are you all in all of this fighting? Now, the good thing is there was never any

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deaths. No killing, just beat each other up. You know, you may get cut, but not killing folks. But, I never understood it. You have this privilege. You got two parents at home. Why are you all acting this way? So I always know I was gonna go to college- which was non-negotiable, you know, with my mom. And I said okay, well, I want to major in Psychology because I don't understand this kind of behavior and the things that they were doing to girls. All that craziness, it just didn't- So, I said I'm gonna major in Psychology 'cause I'm gonna come back and change this because it makes no sense. So that is when it really started getting in my mind. And then, when I went to Virginia State in Petersburg and the very first book that gave me greater awareness about who I was as an African American and the state- I knew history that I was taught, but there was another level of

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History that we weren't taught in schools. And I read the Autobiography of Malcolm X, and that just opened up my mind about a whole bunch of stuff. And not just that, the black-white division, but the black-black division among us, so that influenced my thinking as well. And then when I finished school- because I decided I did not want to pursue a Master's degree at that point- I said okay, my explorer got into me again. I don't want to do additional schooling because my minor was Special Ed and that was hard for me to adjust to see kids and teenagers, and adults in that

condition. So I said, no, I'm not gonna go on further with my education. So I came home, got a job at Montgomery Ward because I could not find a job- No, first I was working with my mother

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because she, which is so remarkable, she was a cook at a donut shop, selling doughnuts, and it was white owned. And she eventually worked her way up to managing the money because the family that owned the donut shop expanded and bought more, so my mother would go around to each of the donut shops and collect the money, and depositing, and doing her little spread sheet about the intake and all that. When the family decided they wanted to retire, they offered it to my mom to buy the franchise, but my mom said, "Nope, I don't want nothing. Don't want to have it." So anyway, that was really my first job, working in the donut shop. And then, when, again, getting back to graduating from college and I became a VISTA volunteer. I started at Montgomery Ward. The point I'm ultimately making here, I never sought out my career. It just fell in place.

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This thing happened, this thing happened, this thing happened. But, this woman came in, her name was Shirley *Gerrall,* and this is what I say about women too. Women have impacted my life, starting with my mother in major ways. Even with my career growth- women. And so, Shirley *Gerrall* came in, and I was standing there, and you know, to take orders if people wanted to order something from their catalog, and she just said to me, "Would you like to-“ she was there to pick up an order- “Would you like to become a VISTA?" I didn't know what a Vista was. I just said yeah, gotta be better than what I'm doing. And then, within two weeks I was on a plane- first time on a plane- to Philadelphia for a training. And this other gentleman, African American guy was a Vista, too. That was the first time the two of us were ever on a plane, which was so remarkable. So anyway, did the training. Came back. I was placed at a home-help agency. Her name was *JoAnn Kutz* and this was an agency ran by women. 100% women.

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Now, for me, my first real kind of work experience- even though I was a Vista volunteer- could not have been better because I was surrounded by women that were very supportive in my growth and development. It was like being with sisters and mothers who were always looking out for you, in many ways for your career growth, no matter what it was, they always did that. I had the longest title that you could imagine: Medical Equipment Free Loan Program Specialist. And so my job was to contact hospitals and ask them for any of their inventoried products, beds, or whatever, wheelchairs, so that they could give them to us so we can provide them to families who have someone at home and do it. And again, wonderful experience with these ladies, 'cause they were so nurturing and always putting me in a leadership role when I didn't feel like I was ready and then JoAnn says,

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"The only way you're gonna be ready is to do it. I can sit and tell you about it, but the only way you are gonna experience it and feel comfortable with it is that I just push you out there and do

it." So anyway, did that. I was there about eight months, and then a job with the Portsmouth United Way came up and JoAnn said to me, "I've talked to the CEO and there's a job there for you- That was the Cedar program, and that was the program where those summer jobs were provided to families with low incomes. So that's how I got that. Because certainly my mother's income was low at the time even though she had a good job in terms of skills and experiences, but still low-paying. And then I told JoAnn I don't want to go because I love what I'm doing here. And she says, "No, Regina, I've talked to the CEO. You have to go." I said, "I don't want to." So I got that position and what my job was reviewing budgets of agencies and proposals of agencies who were seeking United refunds. And then I had to write a short summary for

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the volunteers who made the decision. So I did that, maybe for about nine years, and then the CEO said to me, "Hey, Regina, there's a job at Norfolk that I think you'd be good for, and I've talked to the CEO, the job is really yours. And I said to him the same thing: "I don't want it. I enjoy what I do here. He says, "Well, you don't really have any options on this. I said yes to the guy. He says, "Yes, come on over, and the job is yours. And I said, "Oh, Lord, here I go again." Didn't ask for it, but it was a good opportunity for me. And so I worked my way up to eventually- 'cause I stayed there for five years to run the allocations process and back then maybe seven million dollars at best that was allocated to agencies. Well I learned a lot in that position because I had some good, in that case, male mentors. But, I also learned the ugliness of male gender disparity as well. 'Cause when they hired me, they hired me cheaper than what they should have.

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I had a lower rate. Now, this is what I though was the crazy thing. Now, you give me all these learning opportunities. And, at that point, United Way said that the salaries for non-profits were way too low, and so, they set aside about $100,000 for agencies who applied to raise the salaries of the employees of non-profit agencies, which I thought was really remarkable. So I had to go to training because I was working under somebody else, Doug. I forgot Doug's last name. And so we were sent to a training in Philadelphia- No, was it Boston? Somewhere up North and it was the *[INAUDIBLE]* Consultants and that was their specialty, determining the value of a job. The technical know-how, the problem-solving, and the level of accountability. Three major things, you read a job description and see what were the responsibilities in it, and then they would establish a salary range. The lowest of that job, the midpoint of that job,

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and then also the highpoint of that job. So, you didn't pay me what I should've been payed, but you got me running this program. Now, surely you would think I can think. When I realized this, and I'm learning, I had to approach the CEO. "I'm not being paid what I'm supposed to be paid. And here's the evidence why," because I did have some experience in the United Way agency at another United Way. And so they had to adjust my salary every 6 months to bring me up to where I should have been- above the minimum. Now, I think they still could have done better, but since I was a woman and a young African American woman at that point I’m saying, "Okay.

Alright. I'll let you off the hook. But, at least you did what you were supposed to do. You didn't have to bring me up beyond the minimum of that job." So again, I learned a great deal while I was there. Now, here's the funny part about my story.

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Also, when I was at Montgomery Ward, this woman- white woman- who owned a modeling agency. And, at that point in time, I had cut all my hair off anyway. 'Cause I would go through my hair things. I don't want it. I'd put jerry curls in it, it all fell out, then I cut it all off, then I eventually went to the perm, same thing- hair fell off, then I cut it all off. Then I said, enough of this mess. Why am I doing this to the hair? But, making a long story short, she saw me in there and she asked me would I be interested in modeling. At that point in time I was just saying yes to anything, it's what I did. And I think the way I looked- tall, skinny, no hair- was a different look. So I went through a training, runway, all that kind of good stuff. So I became one of her primary models 'cause I was different in my look. I was working at Norfolk at that time- No, actually I started when I was at Portsmouth- and this is some crazy stuff that I would do.

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Because Norfolk-I mean, the United Way was downtown, so you had all the stores, the Belts, whatever the stores were named at that time. And then sometimes I would get a call, "Hey, Regina, they're having a fashion show during lunch at Belts, and they want you to be in the fashion show. And I was like, now how do I manage this? So on one occasion, I did do this, so I had a meeting that I was facilitating, but I had a lead volunteer, so I got that meeting started, ran across the street to that place to do the fashion show, came back, and the meeting was still going. Now, the jobs I was able to do for that modeling service grew, and so I got into print for the local magazines and the newspaper and then one picture, I was in a local magazine and I was sitting at a bar, just sitting at the bar, and then one of the donors, major donor volunteers at United Way spotted it

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and she came back and told the CEO. She thought that was totally inappropriate for an employee of United Way being in a picture sitting at a bar at a local hotel. And so I said "Okay, I gotta calm this stuff down." You know, me being visible, because of my job. So, I eventually started teaching runway with the agency 'cause I loved runway. And I would tell the girls, I'd say, "If you ever wanted to be snooty, now's the time to be snooty. Think you're all that. It's when you're on the runway." Now when you get on the runway that's a whole other story, because for some reason, people like to see confident people, women on the runway because that's the way they want to feel. And, be that way when you want to, but know the environments when it's not appropriate. But, it does help you to build confidence in who you are, steppin' out that way. At that point, my oldest child was born.

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I decided I wanted to explore the country, so I activated my resume with United Way of America, and this is literally how that went. When United Way received my resume and then the

Allocations Director of the United Way here- Basically, the guy put the two phones together. The Memphis United Way was looking for a person, the number two in the allocations department, and my resume was floating. And so the guy, he basically told me, he said, "Regina, I just put the phones together. I told this guy and I was talking to him about it." And I say, "Well, we need to talk. I got just the right candidate for you." I didn't really- I didn't say where I wanted to be, but the guy that was managing this whole transfer stuff did it. And they encourage you to stay three years in any community, where you go and then spend how many years now? How many years since 1984? Which says a lot about Memphis. It says what I believe in Memphis. Because I chose not to leave

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after three years when I easily could have, and I didn't because of what I saw in terms of potential and what I was learning at the time as a 28-year-old. That's how I got here to Memphis. I came for the interview and that was quite an experience because if I had paid attention to Memphis, I probably would not have come. I stayed at the Benchmark Hotel the night before my interview and what happened was- and I stayed on the fourth floor and the Ramada Inn's pool was right level to, they were just this close, the Ramada Inn, it was called the Ramada Inn at the time, and the Benchmark. And so that morning I get up, and I don't close my curtain. I'm up high. What's the deal? And so, I'm walking around as we walk around to get dressed. You know how you can just feel something out of the corner of your eye? Well I did, and I said, "Well maybe there's a cat over there. Let me turn off the lights."

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You know, you just feel movement. And then I went over and peeked and there was a guy on that balcony. This is how I put things together. I got a call that night when I got in there. Somebody said it was a male voice. "Hey, wanted to make sure you safe, and you got everything, and we're gonna be looking out for you." And then I think, that next morning, I said, "Oh lord." Number one for Memphis. Bad city, I don't need to be here. My first experience. So, I went ahead and took the job anyway. I moved, leased a condo because there were folks who met me during the interview, were saying, "Do not go east. Whites, blacks, everybody. No, we need you here in Midtown." And that's how I got to that spot, because folks were saying, "No. I don't care where those agencies take you. No. This is where you need to be." So anyway, I was not accustomed to tornados.

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Scared me crap-less, those sirens. So, that was strike number two on my list. Where I lived, over there on the corner, almost Parkway and Union, there was a series of rapes going on in that area. And I'm like, "Oh my God. What did I do?" That was strike number three. And for some odd reason I didn't think about what happened to King here. I was so anxious- Well let me go and explore and see who I am as a person. How independent. I did not want to rely on all of my supports. I needed to know who Regina Walker was. And so that was the fourth thing. And I'm like- Oh! And the fifth thing. There was a fifth thing. Every conversation I had, regardless of being male, female, black, white, Jew, it was always, always about race. Coming from the

Norfolk area, the black population's five or six percent at best, so race was never an issue. But, coming to Memphis, it was the primary topic, and I got to the point I would jokingly say to people, I would

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never have realized I was black until I came to Memphis. It was a joke, just to say, every conversation. I don't care if we started with work or- It didn't matter. If we were in a business situation, race always came up. So, I'm like "Ok that's a lot." So there were five things- Oh! There's a sixth one! When my furniture was shipped here on a 18 wheeler thing- 'cause I had a small car- and it snowed, this is in January, and Memphis is rare with snow. It was a blizzard. I had not had the opportunity yet to set up my banking. And it was me and my daughter. My furniture wasn't there and I didn't have any food, and I couldn't get to a bank. I'm like, "Oh my God. What am I gonna do?" I got my daughter, no food, and I don't have a car so I can just get around. Fortunately, one of the guys that worked at United Way came by.

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He said, "Look. I thought maybe you would be having some problems" Just came by. Took me to a grocery store, did all of that just so my child and I could eat. So that's about six or seven points right now. But, irregardless of all of that, Memphis is special to me in so many ways, because when I got here, there were certain people that took me by the hand and said, "Regina, let me show you some things that you may not ordinarily get as being an employee of United Way." And one of them was *Cassell Jones,* and he was a leader in the labor movement, AFL-CIO. And I learned about neighborhood from this man.

Threatt: What was his name?

Walker: Cassell Jones.

Threatt: Okay.

Walker: And he was a leader in the AFL-CIO labor movement. And he took me to neighborhoods. And I said, some of these neighborhoods were horrible looking. But he took me to all of them. "You need to see this. You need to understand if you're gonna be an employee at United Way what folks are struggling with.

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And so I give him a great deal of credit for helping me to see that part of Memphis, 'cause I don't think I would have ordinarily got it being an employee of United Way. And at the time, he was the labor representative staff member with United Way. And then, other people like Ron Register, Tim Bolding- Several of them, Stan Highland over there. They taught me so much more about communities, neighborhoods, specifically, and I was proud of what I was seeing, seeing these residents actually fight for their neighborhoods and seeing that power structure in neighborhoods. They didn't lay around and just say, "Oh, woe is me." These folks were fighting. And I had a chance to learn from them. What I don't see as much of today as I saw in those

neighborhood leaders, like Matthew Davis- One still is working her butt off, and that's Quincey Morris over there in Klondike and she has a heck of job with what's

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going on now for Klondike, Smokey City, New Chicago, Bearwater- all of those communities are about to be transformed, and she's got a tough fight ahead of her with all this re-development that's going on. And most of those residents who are displaced don't get a chance to come back. They don't. So I'm learning all this stuff- new stuff- that I was not aware of. And again, one of the reasons that I wanted to come to Memphis is because when I would go to National conferences, I would run into *Brad Wanza* who worked here, and learning about what this United Way did- which was radically different from the United Way where I was and even United Ways throughout the entire nation. This United Way was really about partnerships, and alignment of efforts- the foundations and city government. They're all set together- United Way. The other United Ways would basically raise some money and get the money through agencies. That was the end of the story.

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But this United Way was really unique. And I don't think even the board leadership understood it because they were trained- Raise some money in your companies, and then United Way recouped some of those folks in your companies and some other people in the community to give it away. So I don't even think the leadership really understood the uniqueness of this United Way. So that's really what attracted me here, in addition to wanting to find out who I was. But, when I found out what this United Way did, I'm like "Whole bunch of people don't understand the value." It's like United Way comes at a certain point of the year, asking you for your money, and then you may hear something later when it's now time to raise more money. You may hear a little bit. We may release something about okay, these are the agencies. But not the uniqueness of what this United Way did. And so, that's what I'm so proud to have been a part of and to learn from others about it, and I always said to several of them, "If

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somebody takes the time to write the second story of this United Way, there are certain names that need to be in that book." Like a Ron Register, like a Tim Bolding, because I managed a part of money- it was called a Venture fund- and that was doing things United Way did not historically do. Carol Colletta, she was another one. I mean, just challenging the premise of United Way. And I'm sitting there going, "What are they doing? They're talking about this organization that I love." Saying things like, "United Way just keep people in despair. You don't do enough to help people grow." Eventually I figured out what she was saying is that most of our money was for youth programs and also safety net programs, when people are struggling for food, we didn't do enough about how do we help them make that net funding? How do we make those next steps for them? So we were helping them through their struggles, but we never took that other stuff during that time period when they were talking about us. And I'm sitting in there going,

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"Oh my gosh" Until I finally figured out what her language really meant. So, I think they really need to be highlighted because it created a massive change for United Way. And we eventually got into affordable housing and the board were basically saying, "No. That's not your job. United Way doesn't do this." Well, we got a million dollar grant from the Feds. And it was Harold Ford Sr., I think at that time, called and said congratulations. Because we were working with some community development corporations, which wasn't heard of in this country for United Ways who were looking at housing- affordable housing in their neighborhoods. There weren't many, believe me. But, we got into the game. And at the board, to get them to ratify- yes, this is good- it got ugly. "No you shouldn't do this. No no no no no no, it's a liability for United Way." But there were two people who helped influence that board. Two primarily. One was Kenneth Robinson

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because he was new, basically in the city, and he was one of those outside-of-the-box thinkers about what United Way could be doing. He was the one to help move in- you know how Dr. Robinson is. He's high energy, he can sell anything because he's so passionate about what he believes. And the other one was Harris Shaw who was the CEO at the time. It was personal for him. He's from the Boston area and he was saying his dad worked as hard as he could, but he could never afford to buy a home. If it were not for those two individuals and Tim Bolding, who helped United Way craft this movement in the area. If it wasn't for them- And I was ready- I'm sitting there, writing my resume letter. I can't be a part of this organization that's being all like this. You sound like you're past to me. And Tim Bolding said to me, he says, "Regina. Listen, just listen. Because what they're saying is gonna help you craft your response back."

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So I was being reactionary, I was pissed, so I was not being strategic. And he says, "No. Listen. They're telling you something. And then you use what they told you to craft your response. Not necessarily what you want to tell them. But, use exactly what they were telling you to craft the response back. Give it back to them. So how do they say no to what they said? Great advice from someone that really impacted my life, too. When I get in those situations and I'm ready to do battle, back up a little bit. So I've had those opportunities throughout my career. Learning opportunities. That was one of them. One was when I was experiencing some problems at United Way early in my career as a young person. You all know how it is as a young person. We know it. We can do it. We don't need your help. And that's how what my three year-old grand baby is showing to me right now. So I can only imagine what it's gonna be.

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And that's the way it was. I was trying to show that I'm capable. I'm competent. You can count on me. So, I'm out here doing my independent thing. Doing this, doing this. I was not keeping them informed, this is what I eventually found out. I was not keeping them informed the way they wanted to, and I was not allowing them to be a part of my growth. I got this. That was my mentality as a 28-year-old. And then, they called me out on it. Took me to this prestigious

restaurant here. It was downtown, it was sitting up on one of those building. I forgot the building. Was it First Tennessee? The Pinnacle. Okay, that might be before your time. And I thought when they took me out that they were about to say, "Girl, job well done. Time for you to move to the next level." But, they were sitting there telling me, "Regina, you don't keep us informed. We never know where you're coming from." Now that one has stayed with me for several years.

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Being the not radical, but the strong, determined woman- And I know my craft, and I know what I'm doing, I was beginning to fight back. And they said, "Well, Regina, you never tell us what's going on, who you're working with." And I started my battle with, "You're absolutely correct, because I don't trust what you're gonna say to them." I said that. I said that. And then, I'm like, I'm in my fight zone. Not being smart. And so I said, "Stop, Regina. Listen to them in a different way." They are telling you they want to be a part of your success, and you basically told them I don't need you because I know what I'm doing. You know the ego we have as young professionals? And so I said, just listen to them. Do more of that. As I started doing more of that, my professional growth grew. Go talk to them, ask them for advice. Even though I didn't feel like I needed it. Ask them, there may be a nugget in there, something that you never really thought about. So I had to change my thinking about that stuff.

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Again, another life's learning for me. And then, another one when I came here, because it was United Way's time to serve as the chairperson of the Region Nine Advisory Council, and that's with the Department of Human Services- how they spent their money. And I think, during that time period, for local money- DHS money- there was about 68 million. It was me to serve on this committee, and it was United Way's time to chair it. And I'm sitting around a table with a whole bunch of older people, experienced, talking about a language that I don't understand. I hear the words, but I don't know what they mean. So, Dr. *Maury Class,* who was the Dean of the Social Work Department at University of Memphis could see my fear. Here I am, this young black woman, sitting around a table of

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primarily- and I don't think there was any black leaders around that table- white men and women. And I'm getting [gasp] scared. After that meeting, he came to me and he says, "I gotta share something with you." He says, "This is what we need you to do. You don't have to be the expert. We're the experts. You need to know how to manage us through the process of getting to a decision." 'Cause I'm feeling real bad. I don't know what they're talking about. I'm inept. And he says, "You don't need it. We are the experts. You get us to a decision. That's what your job is as the chair. And I'm like, "Oh." So from that day forward, I was never intimidated by folks who knew more than me. I needed to have folks who knew more than me around me. But I didn't have to be that person to know it all. Know how to manage the process to get to decisions. Worked for me. So those three things really helped, shaped- No, there's four

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I gotta start with my family in North Carolina. Those four things are really what shaped me in who I am today. Can I be viewed still as argumentative? I try to tone it down some because I do believe in good debate. I really do. But some people interpret it as something other, you know.

Threatt: Comabtive?

Walker: Yeah, combative, argumentative. I've gotten all those names. But, there's nothing wrong with a good debate. Exchanging ideas and so I have no problems with it at all, even to this day. But, I'm trying to tone back since I call myself retired, and it's really not a retirement. How to help people feel a little more comfortable, but it doesn't work out with me 'cause I get back to my own position. I have run into some remarkable people in this city

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when I first got here and I'm finding out who these remarkable- 'Cause I was looking for African American women. I needed a mentor. I needed a sponsor, but I could never get close enough to them. I really couldn't. That was so frustrating to me. Nobody but Sonia Walker. She grabbed me early on to talk to me about race here in Memphis. She was that first African American woman that grabbed me and said, "There's some things you need to know, being here in Memphis." There are, like I said, so many other remarkable women. I found out that Maxine Smith's sister lived around the corner from me. And then her daughter- Maxine's niece- worked for United Way. It took me many years. She says, "Well my mom is gonna be cooking dinners and why don't you come on by dinner."

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So I said, "Okay. Let me stop by." And by dinner and go on home. So I walked in that room and I saw the Maxine Smiths, the Velma Lewises and I'm like, "They're all in this room. Oh my God. These black power women in this room." So you know what I did, 'cause I saw them doing it? They were eating some chitlins. I got me a plate of chitlins and sat down at the table because I wanted to hear their stories. So that was my entrée in to getting to know these women. Who these powerful, black women were and then, over time, I got to get into the powerful white women activists in the city. So I had the best of both, being able to roam and know and connect and all that good stuff. And that's what I love about Memphis, because I eventually got that.

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And let me get into a whole 'nother story. I'm probably taking you away from your questions.

Threatt: No, go ahead. This is your interview.

Walker: But, what is so remarkable to me about Memphis is that- remarkable in a good way, but not good in a bad way- Memphis has so many assets in this city, and what saddens me, because I don't see it- and maybe it's because I'm not a native Memphian- is that what Memphis black folks have contributed to the growth and success of this city. People from around the world- Now everybody thinks people come here because of Elvis Presley. That ain't the only reason they come to this city. Our music legacy, folks throughout the world- You here more of these rock 'n

roll people and everybody else, their talk about B. B. King and all the other ones. They ain't talking about Elvis. They're talking about those folks- us,

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our people. All the time, we're known throughout the world because of our music culture. Secondly, the Civil Rights Movement, while for most of us, that was pure pain. But, folks from other countries- and I know this because of the international exchange program that Leadership Memphis- and they still do it- has been a part of. I would go to the dinners or some sessions that they would have, and the Civil rights Movement, some countries are still experiencing that stuff. We are still experiencing it as well, but they're at the beginning level of what they're dealing with. As opposed to our emerged level, still experiencing it. And they wanted to know, how did y'all do that? How? And so, for our- Oh it's just something that Uncle BoBo did, or it's just something. For them, it's remarkable stuff, and they want to learn. So how do

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we help us to be extremely proud and do that chest thing for what we as African Americans have contributed, and still contributing to the greatness of the city. We don't see greatness in Memphis, and I understand why we don't see greatness in Memphis. Because you have so many families that are struggling and people think of them- and I'll say even people of color- think about some of our families as lazy, they don't want to. And I ain't saying some of that don't exist, but it exists everywhere, regardless of what your socioeconomic status is, and that saddens me because I've gotten a chance, even more since I retired, to be a bit closer to that because of some of the consulting things that I've done. And then with the Shelby County Links, because of one of our programs. Hearing these women's stories, what they endured, but they keep on fighting.

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And some of those women can actually- when we have speakers to come in, either a judge, or somebody- they know the reqs, they can do the training. These are not ignorant people. They have to survive and they figure out how to survive. Now I ain't saying there ain't some bad stuff there, but they know how to survive, and we don't look at it that way. So, going back to that story. That's my passion. How do we as women support other women in this journey? And we do it in all kids of ways. But I think we gotta connect our stuff, we gotta get together and celebrate together as women organizations, and I don't mean to sound anti-men, I'm not. Right now I'm just concentrating on women. 'Cause I am working with a very male run organization. So, how do we start lifting this, how do we get this feeling of hope-

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and I've always hated that phrase, "Keep hope alive." How do we get that feeling of self-esteem of proud of who we are? 'Cause you know, our culture was completely decimated when Africans were brought over here against their will. So, the best way of killing a society is take away their history. And that's what happened. And then we assimilated and we're even further from our history. How do we get that pride? I'ma tell you a funny story. I was at a conference in San Francisco. I was the only black person, only female, too, at the table. And all these men sitting

around the table talking about their ancestry. "Yeah, mine is Norwegian," and stuff like that and most of them were talking. I'm sitting here going, "Okay...what do I have to add to this?" And then I started feeling devious, and this is what I wanted to say: "Well, some of my ancestors who were your ancestors as well enslaved

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my other set of ancestors, and that's how I got to be here." That's what I wanted to say, but I said, "No. I couldn't do that." In that room of white men. No. But, I wanted to say that. Just to say they know their ancestry. That was just taken away from us. Now, I'm not saying everybody, but it has not been a priority for us, and it's not taught in schools. And so, the further we get away from it, to me, the worse it becomes. Most people celebrate their ancestry, and we are not. That saddens me. I'm trying to figure out a way to deal with that. That's where my activism started growing more, when I sat around the table, when Cassell started taking me out to these neighborhoods, and even over time at United Way, 'cause he started managing an emergency assistance program, and he would say, "Regina, you do a good job. I'm proud of you, of what you achieve, but come with me.

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I'm going to this hotel out here where this family is staying." Because he helps them get food and get connected to services. He said, "Come on." He says, "I will not allow you to get too far from this because we need you to do what you can do in your position to make sure we don't forget about these people that are living that way." And it was horrible to watch that mother with their teenage kids in there and the young- It was horrible in their one-room hotel. It was horrible. That's where, again, it started growing and growing and growing and growing. And then, my other passion is about the nonprofit sector. They don't get enough credit. And people think about, "Oh. This is charity." No, this is life-changing stuff, and we're just thinking of it as charity. No. It's more than that. So, that's my other activism here,

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and things that impact women and children and however I can do it. I get a bit antsy calling out some of our institutions. Come on. If your organization is needed, it's needed just as much now as it was needed in the sixties. You need to step up. And I know it's hard for people running organizations. When people give you money, they expect to change what you do. All big institutions are that way. We got lots of advice to give. This is the way we want you to do it. And I would tell agencies all the time coming to United Way, "You need to be careful. If you are committed- If this is, "I gotta have some money, so I take any money," you're doomed for failure. If what you're coming to us for money for and if we give it you this is what we say, you better make darn well it fits with your mission and your vision. And be clear about your mission and your vision, 'cause we will change you. And so

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you know it's nonprofits to me have still work to do. I think the foundations of government, they have just as much work to do in terms of working together, that's what they always say about

nonprofits: they're so competitive, they don't work. Look at government, locally too. Look at foundations. They're doing some things in partnership, but what can you do to help it easier for nonprofits? Whenever a nonprofit gets money from a major institution, they got about four or five Gods they gotta serve. And what's required is not always the same. Now, can't you all do something to just, not move away from who you are, but aren't there some things where one page or- and I think they've started looking at that- two pages, that no matter who you're applying for, those two pages are the same. As opposed to different this and this group wants this. Come on y'all. And then my other thing is, you're going to have me talking forever here. My other thing is, I'm all

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for measurements with outcomes, I get it. But, everything does not lend itself to that rigor. There are things that impact all of our lives. There's no measurement in the world the way that we're asking nonprofits especially to do it. I've become more accustomed to it, more value among the valuing. Everything needs to be quantified now, so how do we quantify that? Because it can't be. My experience is, I can tell you it's an influence on me. But did anybody measure it? I don't know. There are no measurements. So, I did okay. You did okay, you did okay, but there are no measurements. But, okay, how do we do that? I've been leaning more to that "how do we…?" So on one of the foundation boards of mine- It's so funny 'cause I definitely talk a different language there. So, I started introducing mother wit.

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And I'm not quite sure you all are familiar with that phrase. Mother wit in the black community basically means you just got good 'ole common sense. That's what it means. Basically, common sense, mother wit. So I was trying to explain this- No, I used that phrase, and I knew the people around the table wouldn't know what the heck I was talking about. So I made mother wit a person. And I said, mother wit is that person that woman who lives in this distressed neighborhood, and it's all raggedy, got gang stuff, and roads, and all this. And there's a school maybe two blocks away from her, and she sees these kids walking home every day through that mess, and she's standing out there on her porch every day, sees those kids, and she says, "Hey Son! Is your mama home? Are you gonna have anything?" She's looking out for their well-being. She's watching until that child gets home. Now, that's what we call mother wit. That's mother wit. 'Cause I didn't wanna explain.

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I said, that's what we're talking about, because I was trying to get the foundation. Y'all need to move up a lil' bit on some stuff, and this was the issue that I wanted them to move on and to finance those institutions like Women's Foundation and Rights Foundation. 'Cause that's my other thing too. They need more staff. They cannot get to their full destinies staffed the way that they are. So I'm trying, with the community foundation, trying to get them some money, so I brought up that community wit story. And they all sitting there looking. But I'ma get back to mother wit even though it's just a phrase in our community, but I made it that person that no matter what they're always there for somebody. That's common sense, that's just common sense

to do. Making sure they're gonna be safe getting home. Making sure they're gonna have some food. That's mother wit. That's us. Our community. That came out of our community. But, like I said, I love what I do.

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I mean, I really do. I get frustrated by it. I wonder if you knew Phillis Bets at the University of Memphis.

Threatt: No ma'am.

Walker: She went with United Way to a conference about data in Charleston, I forgot how many years ago. Before she gave her presentation, she said to the crowd, "Memphis is embarrassingly rich with opportunities." And I sat there and I'm like, "That is a good tag." So how do we- not just the folks who automatically get the opportunity- like you would get it, I would get it- because of the blessings that we have, but how do we make those opportunities, no matter where you are, there's an opportunity, and you can feel that it's an opportunity? And it makes you feel inspired. And it makes you wanna do more. Now, the other thing we have to focus on is public policy. We got some crazy policies. We always talk about we doing this to help the folks and we don't need

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to be doing this, but you got policies that prohibit them from being the best that they can be, and they know it. So all that does is just segregate us all the time. And you are hurting people. You are hurting them, so there are things they can't do. Some people that I've been working with like Linda Williams and Rebecca Hutchison through Urban Strategies. Because I'm listening more to these agencies that I'm listening to Urban Strategies because they're on the ground. With workforce development, to me, the way I'm seeing it, and somebody can say that I'm wrong. Workforce development, is what's going on now, this whole thing about workforce development. There's so many jobs that are not being attained, which is true. But, my point is, we've got a huge population that's not even ready for what workforce development does, not even ready for what Bioworks does. But, what these agencies know, that these folks have innate abilities, and skills, and talents. That's what the agencies know.

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And they were saying, "We don't get enough investment to help them with those innate skills, and what was so funny, one of the participants said- 'cause she's from California- she says, "Yeah, they got some good...," we call that side hustles. I said, "Well, you don't say that here. We ain't gonna say that word here." ‘Cause if you say side hustles in the South, people are gonna say, "Aw, yea, they sell drugs." So we're not even gonna use that phrase when we're talking about these populations. I am so excited to learn from this cluster of agencies because again they're down on the ground, but they've got to have real support behind them. I'm not seeing enough of that real support behind them. Listen to them. They have something to tell you. Listen to these case managers because they're with these families 24/7. They have something to tell you. I get so tired of us

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bringing in consultants from everywhere in this country without even looking at the expertise you have here. Now what is wrong with this picture there? Do you have that kind of mentality about us as Memphis that even those of us who have expertise, we got Ph.D.s, too. That we can't do it. Now, we'll go to a university, but there's some others out here. So that saddens me about Memphis, too. We don't even value our own talent. That's the way it feels here. I'm all for outside learning, but if you're gonna pay somebody. If we have an outsider coming in, you have a local up there with them too. Tell them to come up with something jointly. Have them blend their stuff plus what we do here. So I'm gonna have a conversation with several of them pretty soon. Say, "We gotta stop this." I'ma show some of them the black, the real black in me. They've seen a lot. They've seen a strong woman.

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They've seen that part. That's just Regina because they accustomed to me, but when I get into my black talk. I'm somebody you feel- this is more my conversation- I'm somebody you feel comfortable with, right? But let me tell you what I think sometimes when you do this. I want a whole bunch of black people sitting in this room thinking the same thing. You bringing in somebody that doesn't even look like me. Yes! I'm accomplished. Yes! I've been around, but I think the same thing, too. A lot of us don't say stuff about it, but that is the truth.

Threatt: You talked about that a little bit at Hattiloo in 2014. There was an article in the Memphis Daily News and you were in another interview at the state of Black Memphis Forum. Do you remember that?

Walker: Yeah.

Threatt: And you said that the city's nonprofit organizations are undergoing a leadership change over the next five years,

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with the established leaders leaving, and you urged the young professionals to take advantage of this change in the organizations and assume those leadership roles. So, from your perspective, we're three years into the five-year approximation that you gave at that time. Where do you think we are in that change?

Walker: I don't think it's happening. And I don't think it's happening for several reasons. Being in corporate America has always been the push. Go to corporate America, which is great. I digress- I'll get to that later. But the other thing, too, any job is not always about having the best resume, it's still about who you know: relationships, somebody to vouch for you, somebody with relationships with somebody on the board that still has to work. I've not seen- No, I've seen some young folks who want to go into the nonprofit field and get the 501c3, and I'd advise them, not yet.

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Get into an organization that's comparable to what you want to be and learn. Learn. Being a nonprofit is not as simple as you think. It's full of passion, yes, but you have a whole bunch of rules and regulations that you have to adhere to as well. So, go to someplace to just get in to learn something about it. Even if it's no more than as an intern or something, just get a sense and learn as much as you want to learn. And the other thing, too, if you haven't made up your mind what you really want to do professionally, a nonprofit could be it. Try to get on a board. Boards want young people now. We're mostly old folks on boards. I don't say that in a disrespectful way because I'm an old folk now. They want the young voice. I say this because I went through all that. Listen. This is the one thing I learned about people in high positions. Number one:

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They busy as all get out. But, they will take some time to give you some advice. So, always do your research about who you want to have a conversation with, who this person is, what kind of board is it, what their priorities are. You can find a lot about a person just by Googling and seeing what articles said. Try to find a way to get a meeting. If you can't do it directly, there's somebody you know who can get you in. People feel good about giving advice to younger people, they do. So, do that. That was a whole bunch of us that just came out since 2014. Not just the nonprofit sector, but corporate America as well. A whole bunch of us came out. So, I think it's right, but you gotta play the game, and don't feel- because this is something that I felt early on- that I was being false to myself if I used certain strategies.

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And then going through some of the things that I work with. Regina, make sure you know ultimately what it is that you want. Know your integrity, what your ethics are. And then, create the right strategy. If I talk about how great you are, 'cause there's some elements of greatness in me, but I gotta have some kind of connection to you ethically. Because if you a S.O.B., I can't play that game with you unless there's something unique I need to get, I gotta have it before the rest of the puzzle. Okay, I'll tell you something good about yourself so I can get it. Everybody likes their ego stroked. That's just human nature. Well, like I said, it's strategy. It’s strategy, so make sure you know exactly right now, because where we wanna go sometimes changes, but know exactly what it is that you’re trying to get to and what strategies do you need to put together. And then consult with other people that you trust about that. You know lots of people around

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I do see young folks roaming quite often around different events and all those different things. Do it. Continue to do it. In addition to, within your own environment, and then sharing information. But, outside of your environment- other things that are being hosted by this group, just go by, just see what the talk is all about, Make your decision. It requires a strategy. It really does. I was lucky. Somebody always- Okay here, Regina. I talked to them. I don't want it. I was lucky for that. So I say, that must've been where I was supposed to be, ultimately, to get to my next destiny. And I'm not nowhere close to where I'm supposed to be, ultimately, I do realize

that. So, it's still a struggle for me. Regina, okay, really? Regina, or is it this? Oh, Regina, which one is it? But, I know the issues that are important to me, and it's around people of color,

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and that's around women specifically, and this is around distressed neighborhoods, and nonprofits. They don't get enough.

Threatt: Because you've said that the people that serve on these boards are older, so with this natural shift already in occurrence: people retire, people pass away. With this natural shift already happening, why do you think that the board demographics as far as age, or race, even, are not changing? Why do you think that many people are not taking these roles?

Walker: Because nonprofits are not high on anybody's list. They're not. It's charity. When you think about corporate America, you think about great careers, super pensions, and great salaries. Most folks don't think about the nonprofit sector. The higher you go in some organizations, you get decent salaries and decent pensions, but in some nonprofits, it sucks. You can

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have a Ph.D. and only make $35,000, in some. But, those are mostly service organizations that provide services. But others, like United Ways intermediaries and some others where you could do quite well- foundations, as you move up. Now, I wouldn't say go in there as an administrative position. But, if you got the time and the where-with-all to do it, do it. But, if you're hungry for it, get working. It's about strategy. Everything is about strategy. How you go about it.

Threatt: So what would you propose to get your five year projection back on track? You said it's not happening, so what would you propose for it to happen?

Walker: When I retired in 2014, what I should've done- 'Cause I didn't do any planning at all. Even my LLC wasn't even my idea. That was my daughter's idea. My attorney daughter in New York.

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Because I didn't think about anything. I just maintained a board membership and somebody would ask me, "Regina, can you help me with my strategic plan?" I'd say, "Yeah. I'll come on over and help." And then my daughter said, "Mom, you still have a lot to do in the world," and she says, "Don't always give away your expertise for free." And I've been payed, very well, in some instances with what I was asked to do. I said, "Okay, well, Regina you've done well." And when we're negotiating I always got what I want, what I asked for. To make a long story short, I don't think of where I am because I've got too much on my plate right now. I'm still trying to balance family, because I didn't balance family when I was working. My daughters were, "Okay, here, I gotta give you an aspirin. I've got to go to work." Until eventually, when the white men that were on my committees would try and reschedule a meeting,

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and they would tell me, "Regina, no, I gotta pick up my son at 3 o'clock because I take him to soccer." Or, "No I drop my daughter off," and I'm like, I'm busting my butt, telling my kids, "Uh-uh, you can't be sick today, here, take this aspirin." When I started seeing the white males do that, I'm like, "Stupid girl." But, then again, we were taught that. I didn't see the black men doing that. They didn't do it. And I'm saying, "Now, wait a minute. They valued their family over work." They got the work done, they were putting in sixty hours a week, but when it came to their children...That changed. I changed. I said, "Enough with that. Enough. Enough." So that was something that we as women gotta learn, I have to tell you. And it's not just black women; it's white women, too. We still trying to be the superwoman, and many times we are the superwoman, but, crap. Don't let it kill us

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and let us negate family. So, that's the other balance I'm trying to maintain, and with my three-year-old granddaughter here, it's hard. It's very hard. Even with what I'm doing now, it's hard. But, that's my grandbaby, so something's gonna have to be a priority, so we have to negotiate this. I won't be in your office every day, but I'll be doing the work nonetheless. So, those kinds of balances. And that's the other one. I'm fully retired, and they say, "Nope. Regina, I'm not gonna do what you did. And my accountant said the same thing. "I don't know why you're doing this, Regina. Why can't you just be retired?" So I'm still young, basically. Yeah, 62 is not old in these years, but I'm there. But, I still realize I'm not where I am. I know what my skills are. I need to stay within that zone, as opposed to some of the other things that I do. I'm a connecter, and I'm blessed because of what I've received out of United Way. I got the chance to know

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all the way down on the street level in distressed neighborhoods, all the way up to corporate America, the CEOs, to be in the boardrooms. So, I was highly blessed in that experience. I can still call some of those folks and say, "Hey, I need you advice." Or, "I'm raising money for this entity, is it possible that you could serve as a sponsor?" So, I was blessed with my experience. With all that experience is for another purpose, and I wanna make sure I use it for the purpose designed for me by God and the purpose that comes from this. So, I'm not totally there yet, but, I'm in my zones. But, I can't do it all and still maintain the family balance that I didn't do enough of with my daughters. So, that's my struggle.

Threatt: So you were talking about, a little bit just now about United Way *as their part in you having that struggle personally*

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But, while you were with United Way you were doing all this work. Did all of it go towards United Way, 'cause you were saying that you were having some struggles with United Way as it was sort of changing into what United Way is today in Memphis anyway? Did you have outside projects from United Way, or were you just pouring all of it into United Way?

Walker: Oh, no no no. I poured a lot of it into United Way, but United way had a policy that staff was encouraged to be involved in community activities as long as we were never on a paid

board, and could not be on the board of an agency that was a member agency of United Way. So, for me, that was my way of learning more by being engaged. Secondly, it was United Way visibility if I was there on those other boards. So, instead of me trying to set up a meeting with 30 people, I got 'em right there at the board meeting, so I had that personal contact. And then, the only boards that I made a decision

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to be a part of because I knew they would be good, strategic partners for United Way. So, I was very intentional about where I was engaged. But, as time went by, the board made a decision they didn't want. And, for me, I controlled all the money. I couldn't tell these agencies not to apply for money. We don't have a rule for that. So, it's just that I had to declare if I'm on a board, like in volunteer times. But, the board made a decision that they thought that was inappropriate, so I got off all the boards that I was on. That was very sad for me because I thought it was an asset to not just have me, but other staff members up here, because you're always promoting the United Way brand. This is not a question that you asked me, but getting back to my journey, this is the first time in working with Hattiloo Theatre that in my entire work

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career, and I would say, in my entire volunteer career to work with an African American institution. Founded by, managed- my first time ever. At the age of, what, 62.

Threatt: Are you seeing a big difference?

Walker: I see many differences. One is freeing me up even more in my blackness, if you will. Because that's so important to me, that I don't shy away from it, that I share my thoughts and my concerns. When I worked at the other place, I had to temper things. I wanted to make sure I got my point across, but I had to make sure I didn't get into no black conversation. Now, I would do it internally if I felt like something was discriminatory. If I thought a statement was made that was very racist, now, I would have- even with the CEO- I'd have that conversation, 'cause I thought it was important that if I'm feeling it, I need to have it addressed

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because I could default immediately to something that maybe that was not the intent. So, when that happened on a couple occasions I'd just go, "Let's talk about this. This is the way it made me feel." And I wanted to make sure that was not your intent in your statement to me. So, with the board, I had to be a little careful about stuff. But, I still had to make sure I honor me as well. But, again, I gotta respect which I hated sometimes, their perception of me as a staff person, which I really didn't respect, but, you know, I-

Threatt: Play the game.

Walker: Yeah. ‘Cause somebody told me, "Regina, you gotta realize, you're just the hired help." And I'm going, "What?" I think he was trying to- See that’s one I interpreted- Your first experience- That was it. But, I think his intent was, because in his company, because of his position, he's considered just the hired help.

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I don't think it was meant a negative thing towards me. It could've been. But, I said, "No, I'm not gonna go there." Because I know he does. You're the hired help. If you're not at a certain level, that whole environment is different anyway. That threw me for a loop. It was during that time, I said, "Regina, the organization's personality and the kind of environment where you want to work no longer matches. So, that being the case, time for you to go." One of my observations, and I'm not quite sure too many other people would agree with. In my early years with United Way, we had CEOs who were board members. You were a CEO, you were on United Way Board. As time went on, the population of the CEOs on the board started dwindling. Maybe they're CVP or Program Manager. So, their philosophy about things

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to me were different than the CEOs. If there was anything that the board members collectively made a decision on, as companies they could do this, CEO snaps the finger, it's done. Now, if you're a Program Officer, or maybe if you were a Senior VP, the only thing you controlled is your division. That's still limited control because the CEO controls everything. So, when you got to, for me, my perspective, when you got to an organization like United Way- 26, 25 million- when you got all that, you got power. You got power. You're running and organization that raises $26 million. That's power. So, their perspectives from their position, I soon learned and assumed, and said, "Woah, woah, woah." They can't go back and just snap their fingers and say, "Okay, this is gonna be done." So when you got United Way, you got a whole bunch of power and a whole bunch of clout because you're board members. We do as you tell us to do.

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And if United Way, which I didn't think, over time with all of uniqueness that you are, we concentrated exclusively on fundraisers like we went back to the past, which is critical raising that money, there's no doubt about it. But, the other assets that you have, you didn't even sell that, and you all are in that every day with the company. So, the uniqueness- because some of the unique stuff is a personal relationship to me with the company. Because, if we start doing something around HIV, or affordable housing, or early childhood development, we are touching a whole bunch of issues, not just with the agencies, but with ourselves and our lining, and providing finances for collaborative work. So, those are messages that kind of got lost in the history of United Way. So, this younger crew didn't have it as much because we weren't doing it the right way.

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What I did was, to me, sometimes felt like, "That's nice. Okay, now how much money did we raise." And that's the way I felt about it. I said, "Okay, fine. I'm having fun creating some results. Fine. Whatever, I have no problems with it." Because I wanted to match what was raised. You raise 27 million, I wanna raise 27 million in grants. That was my goal. There was so much teaching to go on. I'm like, "Okay, Regina. You're not gonna be what this organization may want you to be at the time. So it's best." I cannot argue with the relevance of the United Way, I just

hope they don't get too lost in the past, and I don't argue with the opportunities that I've received as a result of United Way. Could not have been a better opportunity to get a chance to just know so many different people and watch them and what they're trying to do for the community

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at the corporate level all the way down to the neighborhood level. That is just one beautiful picture, and I hope at some point, somebody would tell the story and not just about the individual pieces, but the uniqueness of it. It was a real kaleidoscope of stuff, and United Way just didn't communicate that way. This is- Just look at what we did. *And they didn't communicate that way.* I think Dr. Robinson will be able to do better. I'm praying for it. Anyway, getting back to you all as young people. Do your work. It's all about relationships. Even raising money is about relationships. Getting into certain positions is about relationships. And I sometimes get tickled pink when I will get a call form a young person, "Hey Regina..." If they're asking me about something that is not my domain, I generally know somebody, and I say, "Well look, I gotta couple of friends

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who are into real-estate development or they're into this. I'll set you up, I'll call them and see if we can get together for wine. 'Cause they can tell you. So I'm thinking maybe I should spend more of my time on that side of the world. The connections of people, as opposed to some of the programmatic stuff that I'm doing for institutions. And then, with Hattiloo, getting back to that point, that's the only organization in my entire life- I love Ekundayo's energy. He is nothing but energy, to be honest with you. He's very intentional. How do we expose the black culture and do it unapologetically? When so many people are apologizing. Don't let me bring attention to the fact that I'm black, or the name of something. It's unapologetically. I think it could go a long way in our kid's

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self-esteem of who they are and what our culture is about as time goes on. I consider Ekundayo in the legacy-building phase of his life. I think he needs to have a very strong board behind him, which is being built by the board chair. It's been evolving over time. I think he needs a very strong staff team, which he's trying to build over time. I had a conversation with them about- This is the stuff I would hear throughout my career. People would say the most crazy things. "Well, Regina, why don't your people do more for these people who are struggling?" Crazy stuff.

Threatt: Your people as in black people?

Walker: Yeah, "Why don't your people do more?" They weren't talking about United Way. I know, like, I can't believe some of the things these people say. And so, I said, "Well, we do. Our philanthropy comes through the church, so

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we do." We do our philanthropy differently than that culture. Even Jamaicans do it differently. They have their own banking system, which I think is really unique. Yeah they do. Yeah they do.

It is really unique. Just because you don't understand the culture of a people, why do you assume that things don't exist, is my point. So, with Hattiloo- He's been very successful, I give him credit. Most of his investments have come from big institutions, big, white institutions. That's a blessing right there. So, I told Ek, because of *Robert Bain,* who's a marketing director, and we're having a conversation about raising money- 'cause that's why Ek has me there, to raise some money- is a million for a million. Get a million people to give us- Uh uh not a million for a million.

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A thousand for a thousand. A thousand for a thousand. We ain't got that far. I don't know too many black million-dollar-givers in this city. I don't know none black million-dollar-givers in this city. A thousand for a thousand to raise about a million dollars. I say, "Great concept." So, I talked to some other black women who are superb fundraisers because this is the only time I can just be black, y'all, and I'm just hovering in my black world, you know what I'm saying? And the work environment. It's the only time I can do this, so I'm just having fun. And just saying, "Yes! Yes! Yes! I'm black! Can you tell? I'm black!" I'm doing everything. I'm black! I was talking to some of those women because they have good stories. I want black women to have some role models that look like them as well. So, I'm very intentional about it. So, I took Ashley, who is the Donor Concierge to meet with Mary McDaniel,

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a retired Senior VP from FedEx. And she basically told me, "Regina, no, this thousand- Y'all are making this stuff hard. Segment. You know some 50 thousand dollar donors." I said, "Good point. You're right. You're absolutely correct on that." Then, I said, "Well, this is the other thing I want to do-" I hope people don't think- so far they're not- some of the whites, I've talked to about it have said that I'm being racist or something. I say, "You know what? This is an African American male, and he's putting a lot of energy in helping to elevate the black culture through the arts and through community conversations. It's being done so many ways. He's a young man, and I say we've got some legacy builders in this city. And, we have some African American legacy builders. I want this to be a campaign where the face are these black men who built legacies. Reaching back to another young brother. Ekundayo's 40, but that's still young and what he's trying to do. Reach back and say, "Brother, we're with you and we're gonna raise this million dollars."

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And then some of my other folks that I've worked with, at United Way, and other things, I'm telling them about it just to get their view. One of them said to me the other day, "Well, Regina, white men can give to this, too." I said, "Yes, but I just wanted the face for this- I wanted the African American male, young boys, to see yes, we are out here." 'Cause I was called out. I forgot this brother's name. Young brother who said to me, "Regina, all you all have come out, you're are retired. We can't get financing to build our businesses and y'all are sitting on these big pensions, and y'all don't help us because y'all are so conservative. I said, "You're absolutely correct. I'm gonna live until I'm 150, and I want to have a high quality of life. I am being

conservative." But, you make an interesting point. That's something we have never talked about collectively as people of color. Maybe it's happening and I just don't know

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what's going on here in Memphis, but you're right. I said, that's something I will talk to some other people. I will bring it up whenever I am in some conversations. Are there some things that we can do? I'm on this quest of how do we make sure that pride that we have and ways that we can help- Now we ain't gonna go after no crap. Now, we ain't takin' no crap. But how can we build it up? And make us feel proud, and yes I can. Yeah, there are gonna be some requirements. We're just not gonna throw money out here, but you're gonna have to work hard you're gonna have to validate. That's ultimately, "You know what, how can we do this more?" I remember the- and I'm jumping, please forgive me- Dean of Business at Howard University- 'cause that's where my youngest daughter- she was a business major. I was- For the orientation.

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This Dean says, "We encourage your kids to be thieves when they get into corporate America. There was a little sigh, because people were taking it literally. They're going to steal stuff. But, basically what he was talking about, he says, "We want them to learn as much as they can learn even if it's not something they're assigned to, but just learn. Because over time, we want them to come back into our communities and build. We need that moving into the future." I'm saying, again, having the opportunity to talk to some of those who are trying to build, because some of them have worked in corporate America, but they don't have the support. Financial supports, anyway. They don't have it. I want us to just be feeling good, knowing crap is gonna happen, but to feel good. Memphis got it goin on. Memphis got it goin on. I want folks to wanna just run here to Memphis because we have it goin on. There are opportunities here, and I'm not a Native-born Memphian, but I want

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that for Memphis. We got it. Come. Come to Memphis. Listen to some of the plans that Ekundayo has, that he wanna do. You're on it. Great ideas. Helping Lemoyne- I understand they had a great theatre program, but over time, it died down.

Threatt: Right. They don't have a theatre major anymore now.

Walker: No they don't. So, the way he was talking about them like, *"Woah. There it is."* So, I hooked him up with an organization that said that they would give them 20,000. I'm just waiting for them to go ahead and do their business plan so I can get it through this organization to give them 24, a $40,000 position. Get this going.

Threatt: To get LOC a $40,000 position to have a theatre class?

Walker: It's a position that belongs to us, but it's gonna be placed at LeMoyne. And he's already had some conversations over there.

Threatt: Us as in Hattiloo?

Walker: Yes.

Threatt: Okay. So Hattiloo's gonna be directing a theatre major?

Walker: No, providing a position for it

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to happen at LeMoyne. Since we are applying for the grant, it's gonna be under us. But, that's gonna be a position over there. So we won't be running it, it's gonna be LeMoyne, but we will be supporting them in doing this since he's a 501c3, it'll help a little more. And they have some other major plans over there at LeMoyne College. A big endowment they're trying to do, and building some other units over there.

Threatt: That's exciting.

Walker: I think it's very exciting. So, while you're in the career, your exciting part of your career goes like this, and then it eventually does this. So, it feels good to be in an environment where all that energy and possibilities and this can be done and this can be done. So, I'm still trying to see my way. But, again, I say this with all sincerity, I've been surrounded by exceptional people who took me by the hand.

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Both black and white. I've learned from some remarkable folks who pulled me in on some things, and I'm wondering, now, how did I get this call? Why me? But again, I think it's all a part of what I'm intended to do, and I'm not totally there now, because I've learned from these other groups that are bringing me in, what do I do when I come back out. You know what, I've just learned something today ladies, we need to be considering this. We really need to consider this. Why don't we create our own fund? Why don't we do this collectively? If we want to get involved in some of these real-estate development things going on in the city, who says we can't? Going back to what the young brother says. "Y'all are sitting on all this money." So, what are we doing with it? We're letting it sit and hopefully we got in some good investment things. Well, why are we not buying a part of Memphis. I don't mean that negatively.

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Some of the developers are. Why are we not buying a part of Memphis outside of our homes?

Threatt: Like investing in it?

Walker: Yes.

Threatt: Right.

Walker: Why are we not doing it? Do you know?

Threatt: I don't have that answer, no.

Walker: Most of us, other than what I said- I plan to live to 150 and I want to have a high quality of life. Why are we not? And the only way I find out, somebody invites me to a meeting. I'm like, "Oh, really? Okay. Don't know why you invited me, but I'm glad you did." So, take advantage of that you hear that's going on.

Threatt: So, your focus, your community passions span a lot.

Walker: It does.

Threatt: I said a lot about community empowerment, talking about ownership as far as property and pride. You spend a lot of different things as far as your history and your current projects, so what

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would you say is your goal, your vision for Memphis?

Walker: That Memphis is a city that more than those who are doing well can feel proud of their city. I would love for- Because, again, I'm seeing them often because of these other organizations. I want them to feel good. That they believe they have opportunities available for them. Right now, I don't think we're showing enough, that they have enough opportunities for them. That's my dream. That Memphis is one of those cities where people said, "That is where we want to be." Irregardless of our crime...not irregardless, but the one thing I liked about Atlanta- Atlanta had some problems, too.

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They really did. But, Atlanta never started their story with, my crime rate is this...they always talked about their assets. Atlanta did, and they had some crap going on there. Memphis, we started with our problems. Our poverty rate is this, our crime is this...We don't talk positive enough. You do recognize your challenges, but when you feel good about stuff, your behavior is different. Wouldn't you say?

Threatt: I would.

Walker: Yeah, so why are we not concentrating on- Then when the city designs these phrases, who are you designing them for?

Threatt: Phrases like?

Walker: Um, what is- What's the other one? "Believe" because of the Grizzlies won?

Threatt: Oh, "We Grind Here."

Zaria: Or Midtown is Memphis,

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Walker: Yeah! Who are you designing these things for? Who are you talking to? So you just eliminate a whole other population here. It's not designed for everybody. Don't you all realize

that? That's what I'm thinking. Don't you all realize it? So how do we get there? I'm not saying it's an overnight thing considering generations of families experiencing what they're experiencing, but you can't convince me we cannot create an additional kind of movement here to get more people excited. You can't convince me that we can't. You can't. I think we would've had quality public education schools if the significant players of the city says, "Yes we should." You can't tell me we can't have the best with some of our Fortune 500s in this city. You can't tell me we can't.

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If they can build the kind of companies that they built. It's all about a will to want it. That's where we have a disconnect, I think. That will.

Threatt: Is there anything, before we do a wrap-up, is there anything that you would like to talk about that we haven't covered?

Walker: Girl, I'd have you for the rest of the day here. I don't even know where to start. There are so many remarkable stories to be told by Memphians in this city. I want people to start documenting their story for themselves and those things that you consider, "Uh-uh, well my family just did that." Somebody is gonna find out about, "Oh your family did that," and they're gonna write about it. I think about Manassas High School.

Threatt: Oh, yeah.

Walker: All the movies and the documentary.

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Now, somebody made some money. Was that invested in that neighborhood? I'd say not. I ran into a gentleman at Wild Bill's on Vollintine, older white gentleman, and he was walking around with a backpack and he had a book in his hand about that thick. So I asked him, "Tell me about your book." So, he was writing books about juke joints in Memphis, and Wild Bill's was one of them. And then, Mississippi, the upper part of Mississippi. And I'm like, "What?" And one of the women was performing there that night. And I'm like, "This man from Chicago is writing our story. He's gonna make some money." I said, "Oh my gosh!"

Threatt: Oh, the guy walking around was not a Memphian?

Walker: No. He was from Chicago.

Threatt: Writing about Memphis juke joints?

Walker: Mhmm, yep. Yep. We don't value what we have.

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That's the problem. We don't value it. We don't value it. There was a time when African Americans had no other option but to create their own businesses. No other option but to do it. Right? So those side hustles that are going on in neighborhoods is happening there, but they can't get the same kind of support for certain other people to do it. So, what happened to our pride in

all of that? Number one, you're not going to get the financing from the regular mainstream institutions. This is when I say we can step up. We can step up. Scary to do, 'cause if you're talking about your money, yeah, that's scary. It's scary But,

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Are we no more ingenious than any population of people? No, but the people in these distressed neighborhoods, they're ingenious. Is there something to learn from them?

Threatt: That is a good question.

Walker: Maybe we need to get a focus group of some of them that did their side thing and that is not open to the public, 'cause we don't want any media there. 'Cause if they get any benefits, their benefits will be taken away from them. Maybe we should have that conversation with some young professionals. How do you do it? How do you manage to do this? Who knows? And, I didn't answer your question, but-

Threatt: No, it was whatever you wanted to talk about. That was the question.

Walker: So, you know, that's what I look for. I will say I am- What's the word? What is that word? Where you always believe everything is gonna be great. What is that word?

Zaria: Optimistic?

Walker: Yeah, but there's another word.

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I can't even remember the word. I am one of those believers. All things can be perfect. I have to start there 'cause if not, there are so many things that are distressing.

Threatt: Idealistic?

Walker: No, it's not that word either. It's a name of a person. I am a- Not optimistic. I don't know. It'll come back, probably when I leave here.

Threatt: When the camera goes off you're gonna remember.

Walker: But, I think, going back to Phillis Bets, Memphis is embarrassingly rich with opportunities. How do we help more folks find those opportunities? 'Cause if we move this, everything else is gonna be moved. If we move this-

Threatt: This being what?

Walker: Our families in under-resourced neighborhoods. If we're able to move that. And that's what some of these agencies I've been working with- 'Cause I'm learning from them. I ain't doing anything from them, all I'm doing is recording their stuff. If we can move that, everything else moves. And the way we think we're moving is

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not sufficient. It's not sufficient. Not just the charity, even though the charities- We need to help folks when they're really struggling for the very basics. But if we moved that. And I'm saying, 'What does it take?" What does it take? I don't quite understand it. What does it take? By the way, here's another story. Black United Fund. It went defunct here because the guy, what was his name, *Gary Rowe*, passed away. So, when I left United Way that was one of the things I thought about. Well, let me help resurrect that. I got all this experience and blah, blah, blah… Then as I was out here talking to different people, and they would say, "Well, Regina, folks are not gonna think highly of that. They'll think you're trying to compete with United Way."

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No, Black United Fund is targeted on special communities. United Way is not necessarily focused on communities, they're focused on agencies who serve people. "Well, you should not let it be called Black United Fund." "Why?" "Well, you know how people gonna react to that." "Oh, really? What are they gonna react to?" "Well, it's black." I had black people telling me that. And, I'm sure there's truth in it. But, to know that that thought is a real thought and there's some truth in it. I was like, "Oh my gosh, we've gotten that far?"

Threatt: Right, to direct your decision on naming something.

Walker: Yeah. Black United Fund. And then as time went on, I said, "Okay, well if a name is gonna be a hindrance, alright. So, why don't we call this." And listening to young professionals about not having assets to capital, we expand the purpose. Not just funding nonprofit agencies.

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Maybe we can help nonprofit agencies be more astute about how to get everybody else's money. But, I said, "Well maybe that is something, 'cause there's a void. It's not here."

Threatt: So what did you end up naming it?

Walker: No, I didn't. That's when I got the LLC and get caught up in these other things. Maybe that's where I'm supposed to be. I don't know where I'm supposed to be, but I know where my heart is, and it's gonna be in some realm in that category. And, I hope I do not offend people because it's my value. It's my value.

Threatt: We could talk all day, honestly.

Walker: I know, we really could.

Threatt: But, moving towards our final question, just a random sort of question. If you could direct the next Crossroads interview, if could you tell us the next person to interview, who would you suggest we interview?

Walker: I don't know if you all

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have interviewed Quincey Morris over there in Klondike, 'cause her sister was an activist as well and Quincey is the Director of the Klondike CDC. Sister Girl is an old-school fighter. She is,

she's still out there doing it. And, she fights very hard for her community. Like I said, that type of leadership, you don't see anymore in neighborhoods, but she would be I think a very good one to interview because I don't think that level of leadership gets enough acknowledgement or awards. When you're gonna get an award, they don't get it. To me, they're doing some hard work. They're out there where the bullets fly. Most of us are not where the bullets fly.

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And then, there's some other remarkable women that have done things. I don't know if you've interviewed Carolyn Hardy. She was the Coors, she was the one that bought Coors and she's very active in work going on in the city around economic development. Now, I was very impressed with her 'cause we hosted- when I say we, the Memphis Area Women's Council- started hosting these small conversations between remarkable women and young women, primarily. She was saying, when she made the decision to sell Coors, she was very intentional about who she wanted the buyer to be, so it wasn't just about the money for her, because she wanted to make sure women had a fair chance to be employed, 'cause that was one of her values there. And then, Edith Kelley Green. Again these are women that have been recognized as well, but her story has been remarkable, too.

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She's a retiree from FedEx. She's been building her businesses through franchising. She's the Lenny's- But her personal story is so remarkable. Oh I can name so many, I mean, Susan Stephenson, who is the co-Founder of Independent Bank. She has a heart and because she's the co-Founder she's been very honed in towards opportunities for women as well. So, you see I'm leaning towards certain things. So, I think she has a very remarkable story to tell as well. As a woman, a co-Founder of a bank. And her still commitment to women and making sure women have opportunities, up and down the whole line. Depending on how much of an activist you want, Debra Clubb with the Memphis Area Women's Council. Oh, who's another woman? She is so awesome. I don't have my phone. I could bring her name up and see. That's what getting old all is about.

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See, you just had it right there, and then it leaves. She's Didi Jones- Happy! Happy Jones. Now, Happy has been a big supporter of Hattiloo as well. She's a member of the Snowden family line. And, you know the Snowdens?

Threatt: Snowdens?

Walker: Snowdens.

Threatt: Like the street?

Walker: Yeah, like the street, like the school. They were very influential people in Memphis. She is really an activist- Happy Jones- she's a remarkable woman from back in the day fighting, civil rights activist, doing all that. Now, she has a powerful story to tell. Yes, she really does with

what she's done. And to share with you other women that were in that struggle as well. Even today she's still very much an activist. She is one- what you hear

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is what she means. She doesn't mince words either, at all. Happy Jones. She's another interesting one. There's so many women. I don't know if they've ever interviewed Sonia Walker, she's another one. Old soul- Not an old soul, but she just has that charm about her and the way she puts truth, just put it out there. That's really a skill. She's another one. A lot of historic information in the city. And I'm still leaning towards women, aren't I?

Threatt: That's fine.

Walker: Okay, now I'm seeing names of some others. I got three whole books of women. You know who would be another interesting one? Miriam DeCosta. She has been recording stories of African Americans. She's had two, three, four books out herself to be honest.

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Maybe more than that. Miriam DeCosta. Also, what are their names? Slave Haven? The Turner sisters. I'm sure you all have done them. Y'all need to do the Turner sisters. Remarkable what they've been doing as a family as it relates to Memphis and fighting for the greatness of Memphis. Those two ladies. Well, the whole family, really. It's a whole family thing. They would be excellent to interview as well. The Turners.

Threatt: You've given us some great names. And, you've given us some great stories.

Walker: Maybe that's what I should do professionally. Just go tell stories at the Orpheum. They have to invite me. Go around the country telling stories.

Threatt: Thank you, Ms. Walker so much for participating in this Crossroads to Freedom Project.

Walker: Thank you.