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Tretarius McCain: Oh behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and Knowledge Quest I want to thank you for taking the time out of your business schedule to share your story with us today. I am **Tretarius McCain**.

Courtney Campbell: And I'm **Courtney Campbell**.

Tretarius McCain: And we are participants of this program and we are honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record? What is your name?

Vanessa Sweet: My name is **Vanessa Sweet**.

Tretarius McCain: If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Vanessa Sweet: I mind you asking. I was born in 1964.

Tretarius McCain: Where were you born and raised?

Vanessa Sweet: I was born right here in Memphis, Tennessee. I was born at John Gaston Hospital which is now known as the MED and I was raised right here in this area. 38109 is my zip code.

Tretarius McCain: What is your occupation?

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Vanessa Sweet: I currently work as a budget analyst. I have a degree in accounting and I deal with numbers all day long.

Tretarius McCain: Could you elaborate on that?

Vanessa Sweet: Well I work for the U.S. Navy in Millington, Tennessee aboard the Naval Support Activity. I deal with financial records. I do budget submissions and reports to Congress and to different areas within the U.S. Navy.

Tretarius McCain: Are you or were you ever married?

Vanessa Sweet: Yes, I'm currently married. This year I will have been married 25 years.

Tretarius McCain: That's great to hear. What is your spouse's occupation?

Vanessa Sweet: My spouse is **Christopher** Sweet and he currently is self-employed. He does things with computer and technology that I have no idea about. He loves televisions. He loves communication and he loves to do sound equipment. He installs televisions and satellites and that type of thing.

Tretarius McCain: Do or did you have any children?

Vanessa Sweet: I have three children. I have one daughter.

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She's in the middle. And I have two boys.

Tretarius McCain: Could you describe what they were like?

Vanessa Sweet: When they were growing up they were – they get along very well to my amazement. They played well together. My oldest is ten years older than my youngest and my youngest child just turned 16.

Tretarius McCain: Now let's talk a little bit about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Vanessa Sweet: I grew up in a neighborhood where we had community involvement, community outreach and we stayed outside all the time. When we got up in the morning we would go outside and play and we spent most of our time with my great aunt and she would teach us principles about integrity, about hard work, about work ethics, about learning to get along and most of the friends that I grew up with I still get a chance to see out in the community every now and then.

Tretarius McCain: What was your home life like?

Vanessa Sweet: My home life, it was five girls.

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So is it enough to explain what home life was like? Coming up we only had one phone in the house. My mom would tell us when we could get on the phone and when we could not. So our home life was pretty much ordered. We didn't have lots of income, lots of money but we learned to do without and we didn't even know that

we didn't have income or money until I got older, realizing looking back. I didn't realize that we were in a poverty mentality or poverty status. That didn't dawn unto me until I got older and start working for myself.

Tretarius McCain: So could you describe what your sisters were like?

Vanessa Sweet: Well my sisters to me they were the pretty girls. They were the smart girls and I was just the mediocre average girl. That's how I saw them. But looking back and we start talking about it they see different things in us than what we saw in ourselves. So we played pretty much together. It wasn't as if we didn't have anything to do. So I got along very well with my sisters.

Tretarius McCain: Who were your parents and what were they like?

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Vanessa Sweet: Well my parents – my dad was **Frank Carl** which I rarely ever got a chance to see because my parents were never married at the time. My mom was a teenage mother. I was born when my mom was a young teenager and she had five girls by the time she was 20.

Tretarius McCain: Where did you go to elementary school?

Vanessa Sweet: I attended **Floorder** Street Elementary which to my knowledge is not there anymore. It was right there on Floorder Street and I attended that school up until I was in the fifth grade.

Tretarius McCain: Where did you go to middle and high school?

Vanessa Sweet: Middle school I attended **Jeter** Road Middle School and I graduated from White Haven High School.

Tretarius McCain: What was school like for you?

Vanessa Sweet: Oh I loved school. I loved my teachers. I loved to learn. I loved information and I was all about getting the grades that I needed not knowing anything about college. It wasn't until I was a senior in high school that I realized that I wanted to go to college.

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I was the spring of my graduating year till I started looking at colleges but I always loved information and I always had a desire

to study. I always had a desire to just strive to do more things than what was in my immediate surrounding.

Tretarius McCain: Did segregation impact your educational experiences?

Vanessa Sweet: Well to be honest, I didn't even realize I was segregated. It never dawned on me that we were different, that races were apart from one another until I got much older. It was right around the time in the late '70s when we saw the movie *Roots* that we realized that there was segregation issues. We had heard about it. We had heard people talking about it. In my home we saw people from different races and ethnic backgrounds. My mom would bring in people not on purpose, it's just that she knew people from other races and other cultures. So we were always experienced and exposed to that type of thing and it was not an issue to us until we started seeing it on a bigger picture as we got older.

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Tretarius McCain: What church or churches have you attended?

Vanessa Sweet: Well I've been a part of Baptist denomination. I've been a part of Methodist denomination. I've been a part of Simply God's denominations. As being a part of a membership I'm currently a member of Prayer House Church and it's located in the South Memphis area.

Tretarius McCain: Can you describe this church?

Vanessa Sweet: Well this church is – well we come together to fellowship. We have hot meals at this church. We do things outside of church together. We pray together. We study together and we just do life together at this church.

Tretarius McCain: What kinds of activities were you involved in growing up?

Vanessa Sweet: When I was growing up I was part of summer camps. I love the summer. I love to swim. I was a life guard for many, many years. After I got old enough my first job was through the public system where I was able to be a camp leader and I was also a life guard like I stated earlier.

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Some of the other activities I included and I was in sports. I was very active in sports in school and also in the social organizations.

I was president of my student council and I hold a position as an officer on the senior board.

Tretarius McCain: Can you share some of the memories that later on have flourished your life?

Vanessa Sweet: I think one of the memories from my childhood that stood out the most was we had to get up early in the morning. We would have to go to work early in the morning. I've been working ever since I was 13 years old. Prior to that my great aunt used to always make us go and cut yards. As we would cut yards we didn't make that much money. Sometimes \$0.50, \$0.75 just to cut a whole yard. But just knowing the value of responsibility, the value of hard work, the value of knowing that respecting other people and treating your elders with respect and I think that took me a long way.

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I still hold that honest day's work for an honest dollar.

Tretarius McCain: Did the fact that your mother was a teenage mom affect how you came up?

Vanessa Sweet: Well you know, it didn't even dawn on me until I got older because she would say things like, "We're growing up together; I'm learning as I go and I may make mistakes as a mother that I didn't have an instruction book on how to train or what to do and nobody taught me." Because my mom, her mother died when she was like 7 or 8 and then her grandmother died when she was around 12. So she felt as if she was left alone. She did own a house when she was young but she didn't have an income or source of money to keep that house. So because of taxes and because of other expenses she did lose her home and wind up living with an aunt. So she felt as if she had no one there for her and we didn't even understand that as kids coming up. We didn't know any different until we were much older that we had a teenage mother.

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Courtney Campbell: How are you affiliated with South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: Well to us when we were coming up as kids my great aunt used to take us up town. South Memphis was up town. We would walk everywhere we went because my great aunt did not have a car. So

we would either catch the bus and we would drive up to McLemore or to Mississippi and she would take care of her bills and pay her responsibilities or we'd go shopping to the dry goods store, to the grocery store. This was our community where we came to do business. Like it was asked earlier about integration, we didn't know any different. This was where we came to do all of the business that need to be taken care of as a family and as a community.

Courtney Campbell: How old were you during that time?

Vanessa Sweet: Probably about five or six.

Courtney Campbell: What does South Memphis mean to you?

Vanessa Sweet: South Memphis has so much potential. It has so much opportunity. It has so much rich heritage. Like I stated, we do fellowship here. This is where my church home is located in South Memphis.

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So we enjoy coming. Initially, years ago, I said I'd never go to that area, I'd never go to that community but when I come here I feel a sense of safety. I feel a sense of belonging. I feel a sense of pride. I feel a sense of where people see where they've come from and it's a place to come home to.

Courtney Campbell: You say you would never go to that community but younger you would frequent this community.

Vanessa Sweet: Oh yes, all the time.

Courtney Campbell: What changed? What...

Vanessa Sweet: Well there was a time of abandonment where many companies and businesses had left the community. Those places that I used to go when I was five and six they're no longer here and they have closed down and those opportunities that were available for individuals who were upward mobility they're no longer available. They've moved out. So people went where the businesses were. They went where the stores were. They went where the opportunities were.

Courtney Campbell: So with those people moving out how would you describe South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: I describe South Memphis as a place of opportunity because they've left and now those places are left open for anyone who wants to come in to take advantage of that.

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Courtney Campbell: So do you see it as thriving although there's a void in South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: I don't see really a void in South Memphis. I see opportunity in South Memphis. Many times we're expecting others to come in and do what we can do for ourselves. We're waiting on the big companies. We're waiting on the grants but those things are available for us to take advantage of. So when you invest in it, when you take ownership in it it's more worthy and you see it as more valuable than when someone gives it to you.

Courtney Campbell: Were the people in South Memphis different when you were growing up or before this transition took place than they are now?

Vanessa Sweet: I really don't see it that way because from a child's viewpoint there was not anything that I looked at. As an adult I see it differently because it's a whole different level field.

Courtney Campbell: Have you frequented South Memphis since you went when you were coming with your aunt? Was there a time when you weren't frequenting South Memphis?

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Vanessa Sweet: As I got older and I got in high school it was not even on my radar to go to South Memphis. It wasn't until I started coming to attending church here in 2008 is when I started coming.

Courtney Campbell: What are some places in South Memphis that you think make it a great place to be?

Vanessa Sweet: Some of the events and locations that make it great?

Courtney Campbell: Mm-hmm.

Vanessa Sweet: I think it's the homegrown attitude, the homegrown mentality how people like things that are unique that you can only find in South Memphis. It's not a chain place where you can find chains or

McDonald's or Burger Kings but the chains of uniqueness that are located in this community that you can't find anywhere else.

Courtney Campbell: Such as?

Vanessa Sweet: Such as the buildings. Some of the buildings are so unique. Some of the homes. You would never find a duplication of that home anywhere else, not even in the United States. And the churches that are here that have been here for so many, many years.

Courtney Campbell: Do you attend church in South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: Yes, I do.

Courtney Campbell: What church?

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Vanessa Sweet: My church is Prayer House Church and we're located on Wicks Avenue.

Courtney Campbell: How is South Memphis different now than when you were younger in any way such as how it looks or the activity that you see now and didn't see then?

Vanessa Sweet: Well as a child I was looking from a kid's viewpoint and eye point and we were only with my aunt and we only went when we were told to go and we were holding hands as kids and we went into the businesses. There are not as much residents that I can actually say. I remember my dad bringing me to some of the homes where we could go and spend time with some of his friends and I particularly remember a house on Lauderdale where we would go and eat hot tamales because his friend made homemade hot tamales. We just looked forward to that and we really enjoyed it. Also places like Carter's Fish Market. We would go there to buy the fish all the time and I really enjoyed hanging out at Carter's Fish Market.

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Even as a young child he would give – if you took your report card and you had good grades you would get a free fish plate. So those are some of the things that I really remember about as a child. Some of the churches that we would attend there on Parkway, many of the churches up and down that road that we really enjoyed fellowshiping with.

Courtney Campbell: Do you have any fond childhood memories that you would like to share with us?

Vanessa Sweet: I think the fond childhood memories was looking forward to going up on McLemore and sometimes **on treat** and we would always get a snow cone if we behaved and did what we was supposed to do. If my aunt was really nice and generous to us we would get a chance to share an Orange Crush. All five of us would share one Orange Crush soda pop.

Courtney Campbell: You're a volunteer _____.

Vanessa Sweet: Yes.

Courtney Campbell: Who do you volunteer with?

Vanessa Sweet: I spend time with Last Time Outreach Ministry with Dr. Williams, Dr. **Sharon Williams**. My daughter has done some work with her and my husband and I also serve and volunteer with her.

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Courtney Campbell: Through Outreach Ministries do you volunteer – do you witness or are you volunteering with a group of **young**...

Vanessa Sweet: We pretty much volunteer resources and time and advice. What they do there is for people who are seeking to obtain their GED, people seeking for job employment and seeking just for social skills, how to be better communicators, job applications, interviewing skills and things of that nature.

Courtney Campbell: About how many hours a week do you volunteer?

Vanessa Sweet: Well it's pretty much as needed, as she needs information, as she needs resources or advice or input. We pretty much intercede for her and pray for the needs of the ministry.

Courtney Campbell: You, being college educated, do you think significantly makes this program a lot better than one of the other **rivals**? Are you working with other college educated people?

Vanessa Sweet: Well many of the people there have their masters. Once they get their GED she doesn't stop there.

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Dr. Sharon encouraged individuals to go on toward an associate's degree, a master's degree, to continue to strive for education. But it's something that's dwelled on the inside of us, a desire to learn, a desire for information, a desire for knowledge. Even if we have a college degree sometimes certifications are necessary. Sometimes it's a skill or a trade is important **vice** of college education. Many times we think that everyone needs to go to college. Sometimes we need to want to do better for ourselves.

Courtney Campbell: What do you think is the impact of the Outreach Ministry? Would you say it has helped tens of people or...

Vanessa Sweet: Absolutely. Not only the individuals that come. It impacts their family because in order for you to get any type of help you're going to need some support because after the classes and after the studying and after the pep talk you're going to have to go home and live that real life, that reality. Even if it's some type of addiction that you may have you're going to need someone to be accountable to and someone to let you know and remind you to stay on track and to stay focused.

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So that's important. Not just the individual being impacted but their entire family reaping the results of someone wanting to do better. That rolls off into your community because if you're educated and you have a job and you're employed your community will be better. You'll be able to pay your taxes. You'll be civically responsible and you'll be looking out for your community to be better. I think that goes back to what you were stating about, "Has the community changed or grown or improved," because I see as integration came along some people left the community because they saw that they had other options. Many stayed and some have gone and come back to sow back into the community. I think that's a positive thing.

Courtney Campbell: Do you see other programs such as Outreach Ministries making an impact in the community?

Vanessa Sweet: I do. Even as I drive down Mississippi Boulevard I see some of the community gardens popping up and I think that's important, the fresh fruits and fresh vegetables being available for those that desire them and can't otherwise obtain them.

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Courtney Campbell: Do you encourage others to volunteer with your organization or in the community?

Vanessa Sweet: Absolutely. It's very important that we get involved and see life outside of ourselves because we're not just created just to take, take, take and to consume. We're also designed to give and to produce.

Courtney Campbell: I understand that you have a positive outlook on South Memphis and you have _____ so it's not completely an outsider's view. But I would say that everybody doesn't share in your view. What do you think is the reputation of South Memphis as a community?

Vanessa Sweet: Well as any community you go into you're going to always see the negative. But what is your focus? _____ we will look at the negative and so many things that are going wrong but what about the things that are going right? You are true enough in reality. South Memphis does need some work. There is always room for improvement. For every house that looks nice and looks very well taken care of there's so many other houses where it's dilapidated.

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It's abandoned and no one is doing what they need to do. So when we see at least one trying and one stepping up and doing the things that they want to do to take care of their property, to take care in what – have pride in what they have others will say, "Well if they can do it I can do it was well." So that's the mentality and the attitude and that's the lenses that I look out of. People say it may be warped but it's about moving forward, about growth and about maturity in our communities.

Courtney Campbell: So do you think the reputation is a negative reputation?

Vanessa Sweet: It depends on who you ask. You could ask some people from South Memphis who live here and they can say it's negative and you can look at some others who will never leave South Memphis because of their love for it. So it's your perception that matters the most. In regards of what other people can tell you when it all boils down, "What is your personal perception about where you live and your surroundings and what you would like for it to be?"

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Courtney Campbell: With new changes in South Memphis like College Park are you hopeful about the future of South Memphis just with this rebuilding?

Vanessa Sweet: This was my first time visiting this area. I had to call to find out where it was located and I was very impressed with it. It was probably about a month ago when my son was hosting an outreach opportunity for young people that we got a chance to come over and actually walk around and we prayed over the grounds and the communities. It was a positive thing because being things that we're asking for and when you reach out somebody has already taken initiative. Someone is already working on that thing. Somebody has already had that vision, that same plan and that same goal. They may not have gotten as far as we would like to go but if you reach out and you go out and look and start seeing things that you would like to take place somebody else is thinking about the same dream or has the same aspirations. That's what I like about College Park. It wasn't just one person's idea or one person's dream. They wrote the vision, they explained it and shared it with someone and others grabbed hold to it and they joined in.

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So it's just not one person. It's not just one group. It's not just one church or one community. This is not unique to society. South Memphis is not the only one that's experiencing what they're experiencing but it's taking individuals who will step up and say, "Yes, we can."

Courtney Campbell: Aside from worship and volunteering do you have any other involvement in South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: I was trying to think as I was coming over who do I know that lives in South Memphis. We have members from our congregation that reside here and my sister just recently graduated from _____ College. So we spend time here and I know people that work in this community.

Courtney Campbell: If you don't mind me asking, where did you attend college?

Vanessa Sweet: I attended Bethel College as undergraduate and for graduate work I graduated from University of Memphis.

Courtney Campbell: How would you compare South Memphis to Greater Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: I see South Memphis as the center, as the inside of Memphis and if you look at any type of fruit or any type of vegetable if the inside is rot and it's not taken care of it's going to spread to the outside.

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So whatever's taking place in South Memphis it will eventually – the veins will grow into the outer area. So really South Memphis is the heartbeat and the pulse of our city. Many times we look at the peripheral and we think that the peripheral is taken care of but if your center is not good you're in trouble.

Courtney Campbell: Is there anything you would like to change about South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: I would like to change the people that live in South Memphis, their own perception. If they could just see themselves because many times we're trying to compare ourselves to others, we're trying to compare our city to other cities. There is no other community like South Memphis. There is no other area like South Memphis. They are unique and they're special in their own way.

Courtney Campbell: Is there any advice you would want to give to young people in South Memphis?

Vanessa Sweet: The people in South Memphis, I'm just saying keep doing what you're doing. The ones that I've met so far, even on today I've been encouraged and I like their positive attitude.

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I like their desire and their strive to do something outside of themselves and just to learn new cultures and experience new things.

Courtney Campbell: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to discuss?

Vanessa Sweet: South Memphis is rich in its education. It's rich in its pride. It's rich in its history. There are a lot of positive things that have taken place in South Memphis that you have not begun to tap into. My desire for you is as you're doing this study, as you're talking to other you're going to learn so many things about your community that are so unique and so empowering for you that when you go other places you'll know so much that your parents, your great-grandparents didn't even realize was available for them right here in South Memphis.

Courtney Campbell: Thank you so much Ms. Sweet for sharing your worries and your story with us today.

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