

Marlon Foster, 2013

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Sumita Montgomery: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and Knowledge Quest, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm **Sumita** Montgomery.

Tretarius McCain: And I'm **Tretarius McCain**.

Sumita Montgomery: And I'm 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?

Marlon Foster: I'm Marlon Foster.

Sumita Montgomery: If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Marlon Foster: I was born in 1972.

Sumita Montgomery: Where were you born and raised?

Marlon Foster: Memphis, Tennessee.

Sumita Montgomery: What is your occupation?

Marlon Foster: I'm Executive Director of Knowledge Quest.

Sumita Montgomery: What is your spouse's occupation?

Marlon Foster: She's a site director with Knowledge Quest.

Sumita Montgomery: And do you have any children?

Marlon Foster: Yes. We have three children.

Sumita Montgomery: What are they like?

Marlon Foster: Oh, they're awesome. My wife is Sheila and our children –

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Marlon is second, Alexandra and Victoria. So, we have a great bunch.

Sumita Montgomery: Now. Let's talk a little about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Marlon Foster: Well, South Memphis, as it is affectionately called, is my neighborhood where I've grown up all my life. It was a fun time growing up. I enjoyed my neighborhood. I still live, work and worship in the same neighborhood as my upbringing and wouldn't want to be anywhere else. It's an awesome neighborhood.

Sumita Montgomery: What was your home life like?

Marlon Foster: My home life – I was raised in a three generation home. My grandparents moved to the neighborhood over 50 years ago. They were the first African Americans to move on their street in this urban pocket of South Memphis where we live. My grandfather was a guy who was educated for his time. He had a high school diploma. He would – I remember him coming to every dinner table with his overalls.

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He would have a suit jacket on. It was a formal upbringing. My grandmother, she had an eighth grade education 'cause that's as far as she could go in Mississippi. So, she fled Mississippi after eighth grade and she was high school age. She came to Memphis.

So, we were raised in three generations – grandparents, aunts, uncles, first cousins all under one roof. So, each family unit had their own bedrooms. So, my mother and my brother and I had our own bedroom. My aunt had one child – they had a bedroom. My other aunt had one child – they had their own bedroom.

And my uncle – so two uncles. One died when I was about two. But these family units, though, we had – you had your own family unit in your own bedroom, then we had the broader family unit where we actually ate dinner together every day. So, that was my upbringing. It was a very close-knit –

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family. Very tight. Very much so connected and supportive. The family structure was ideal.

Sumita Montgomery: And who were your parents and what were they like?

Marlon Foster: My father's K.C. Foster – the initials K and C – and my mother is Vivian. Her maiden name was Brunner. And they were awesome. I had a stepfather, Jerry Walker. I loved those two men to death.

They were friends. I often tell folks, “If I was hanging over a cliff and I had my biological father and my – what some call – stepfather in either hand, they’ll probably pull me over ‘cause I wouldn’t let either one of them go.” It was that kind of love. My mother was very strong. Very loving, very selfless in all that she did.

My biological father, he was –

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very connected, very a man of character and integrity so he passed that on. My stepfather, very highly involved in leadership in the church. So, those individuals molded me along with my grandparents.

Tretarius McCain: Let's talk a little about how life in South Memphis used to be. What does South Memphis mean to you?

Marlon Foster: Wow. South Memphis means assets to me. So many people, so many gifts – folks that are so smart and so talented. I think what I do now, I try to trace it back and see why am I doing kind of community building, organizing, community development, youth development type work. My mind went back to when I was 10 years old – my grandmother and some of –

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her friends – I call all of them my grandmother – started this group South Memphis Citizens United for Action. The leader was Lorraine Jones. She still lives on Mississippi Boulevard. But they started this group, this kind of civic club of sorts, and I just remember growing up as a kid, like, the whole west precinct of Memphis Police Department would come to my grandmother’s house in the evening. They would be there preparing food and meals just showing their appreciation.

I remember her getting utility poles and lights – additional lighting – put on the street. I remember my grandparents paying to have our sidewalks redone and then really pushing the city to make sure they did the other sidewalks on our street. And they ended up doing that. So, it was just those kind of experiences I grew up with as a child, with still kind of going to school and living and going to church, right in the same neighborhood.

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So, when I learned about all the gifts, as I've gotten older, I just really appreciate all those experiences a lot more. But I had fun. It was a great place. On the street I grew up on, it was the same way like in a church. Every house was three generations.

So, on our street that was called a dead end street and the street that ran off of it, I could take you in any house on those two streets – they formed a little T – and you can not only sit down and have a cup of water, you could lay down. But it was all grandparents, children and grandchildren in just about every house. So, it was that kind of experience and that's kind of what formed my South Memphis experience.

Tretarius McCain: Are you comfortable with the reputation of South Memphis?

Marlon Foster: I'm comfortable with the character of South Memphis. Its reputation is who people say you are –

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and think you are and your character's who you really are. I think the reputation has lifted a lot. People talk about – if you look in the paper, Jesup, 3126 – my zip code 3126 and 106 cross right on my street. So, my zip code is 106. My street is the line between 3126 and 106.

So, both of those zip codes where I live always get the bad raps. But even if you look in the paper, on crime, you would rarely see crime, a lot of it, in those areas. So, I think there is this – we have our challenges. And I never use the word “problem” – I say “challenges.” But the key for this character that we have is to understand it.

So, it's things like these stories that are being shared, that are being captured to really reveal who we truly are, all of the rich legacies –

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of this community shared just where we are – I'm sitting right now Ida B. Wells wrote an anti-lynching paper right here on this spot of ground. I mentioned, if I go one block to the south, Joseph B. Walker house – Universal Life Insurance Company founder. I go one block to the west – historic Mason Temple where Doctor King made his last speech, the largest African American auditorium in

the nation at one time. I go one block to the east – I have Le Moyné-Owen College where my wife attended, where I attended, where my mom attended – the only historic black college in Memphis. I got one block to the north, I have Tuskegee Airman Lieutenant George Lee, who also was a leader of the GOP who our neighborhood post office is named after – so, that's the rich history.

That's who we are. We are a community of leaders –

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who have formed and shaped, in many ways, the culture and the character of the city. I mean, South Memphis is Memphis by my understanding. So, I always see and look to who we really are. And I think one of my goals in life is how do we capture that story and that reality, communicate it to the people that are coming along behind me and then we live out the character of who were, South Memphians, versus the reputation that's often times lifted up.

Tretarius McCain: What was going on in South Memphis during the '60s and '70s period?

Marlon Foster: For me, I was born in 1972 so I'm a little young in that. But my parents would often lift the stories up of Stacks – Stacks was still around when I was a kid. I walked passed Jones Big Star was the grocery store of –

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my upbringing. There was also my next-door neighbor had a Fat Burger shop right next door to Jones Big Star. There was also a barbershop that was right next door we got our haircut. So, a lot of that history and culture was still physically there when I was a kid growing up. So, that kind of whole context was kind of around for me that were remnants of the '60s and '70s.

Again, my time in the '70s was really elementary school and I've kind of lifted how awesome that experience was for me. But most of the '60s has been those stories that have been handed down. Stories of my grandmother leaving Mississippi and why she did that. Stories of my grandfather, who had a high school diploma and his whole spirit of service and how they got together. These stories of –

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my family members sitting around those kitchen dinner tables that were – so my story – those stories, for me, have been handed down when it comes to life in that particular time. But that's where I draw the rich history from – from those stories at that period.

Tretarius McCain: Were the people in South Memphis different then and now?

Marlon Foster: I think there has been some flight as well as some migration over that period. I think, in that period of '60s and '70s, you had a very highly professional cohort of community members from school teachers to business owners to educators from not only grade school but even on the collegiate level. So, you had this high education class –

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this high professional class, of that period, that of course, their economic vitality or of them being able to do better and with flight that went on ___ from the urban cohorts – many of that highly educated professional class exited as well. The house I live in, it was built in 1900 – the first African Americans who moved in that house. We're the fourth family to live in that house from 1900 but the first African American family moved in in 1963. So, that period represented this kind of migration in and being accepted in but then you fast forward 20 years later, 25 years later, you start seeing this exodus. So, I think that has brought the difference.

You see the rise of public housing within that period, this idea of concentrating individuals –

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that are very resourced, very gifted, very talented but when it came to economic resources, they were challenged in that area. I think that bred a sense of despair. I don't think that's connected to just poverty. I read this article – this guy was from NYU and he's out, “I have old money, money that's been in my family all my life. My friends, we can do whatever we want to do.”

He said, “But the greatest emotion that I sense amongst my friends and I is despair.” So, when I read this article and this guy's rich, money, has everything he wants, travels the world as a college student, as a professional, I say, “Wow, in my neighborhood, we're a city that has the highest poverty rating in the United States of America. You know the greatest emotion I see is despair as well.”

So, that kind of revealed to me that if you operate at any end of the extreme, you may get the same thing, which is despair. So, I think –

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that's what has changed. But I think the more people like my wife and I and our neighbors and others say, “No, we're gonna stay planted. We want to be people that could move but we want to make an intentional desire to stay.” And then to come alongside our neighbors to do with our neighbors wherever you fall on socioeconomic stations or ladders. I think that doing with is what's going to bring us back.

Tretarius McCain: What are some of the places in South Memphis that make it a better place?

Marlon Foster: Wow. I think Le Moyne-Owen College is definitely a jewel. That's an academic focal. I think that's so important. I think the resurgence of Stacks, of the museum and now even the schools that are connected. I think the work that happens from Le Moyne-Owen College Community Development Corporation that's trying to bring a –

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grocery store back to replace Jones Big Star. That was an African American owned grocery store that everyone knew. I think that is a highlight what Mister Heath is doing with that CDC. I think the work that Saint Andrew – the works they're doing with around – issues around healthcare and the farmers market, issues around education in our schools, issues around workforce development that that church is participating in is a highlight. I think the South Memphis Shalom Zone – these churches like Centenary United Methodist and you have Evening Star Baptist, you have Greater White Stone – you know, all these churches – New Salem – that are coming together, I think that's going to definitely bring us back.

So, the communities of faith, the great –

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nonprofit work – efforts like Knowledge Quest, if I can be bias on that end, I think that type of grassroots, organic, neighborhood lead youth development, community development efforts – that's a highlight. I think all of those are serving as upticks. Four Way

Grill at the corner of Mississippi and Walker, they made a big – they took a big risk to come back, bring the restaurant back. There's more opportunity at the intersection of Mississippi and Walker. So, this stimulation that will happen for our economic vitality from that corner is also – it also gives us hope.

Tretarius McCain: In your opinion, what is the best thing about South Memphis?

Marlon Foster: The people. The people. Human capital, bar none. It's the people. I just love the people. I say that as pastor of –

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Christ Quest, I love people anyway. But the people – when I can ride down Walker Avenue and it's like a *Cheers* episode – everybody knows your name. And I'm waving and speaking and all the characters and all the children, all the gifts – it's just the people are just beautiful. And it's connected. And people look out for one another.

And I know all my neighbors. I know folks all up and down the street. And the way – that bond and that community pride is so special to see, experience and to be a part of.

Tretarius McCain: What assets do you think could make South Memphis a better place?

Marlon Foster: I think building on the assets we have. I mentioned education – building on education – where we continue to instill not only just great schools –

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and the collegiate opportunities but the value of education, to make education relative. I think to build on that asset, education scholarship –

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Sumita Montgomery: What was school like for you?

Marlon Foster: School – I attended Stafford Elementary. That's right here in the neighborhood. That school was what some would experience – they would call that a private/public school. It was a very close school. Generations of children and children's' children would attend that school.

I remember growing up, they would come to my house and get my grandmothers rocking chair for the school plays, it was that kind of close connection. And actually, what I do now – little known to many folks but it's really me just living out that elementary school experience.

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So Knowledge, 'cause the colors are green and yellow – so, some think it's Gaston, some think it's Vance, some think it's BTW. But it's actually Stafford Elementary. I just don't say anything. But the Know your Black History Bowl that Knowledge Quest has, that's from my elementary school experience. Our field days is from my elementary school experience.

So, many of the things that I do every day is really me living out my elementary childhood experience. So, you can see that was very special in my life. I left there – Belleview Junior High School would come and recruit students from Stafford Elementary. So, I was one of those recruits for their optional program at that time. So I went to Belleview.

Didn't make the trek to Central which was that kind of natural pattern. I jumped to Orange Mile. So, for my family house that's been in South Memphis all my life, while I was still in elementary school, my mom and my stepdad, we moved to Orange Mile.

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So, I actually was still going to school in South Memphis for elementary and junior high. When I got to high school, I went to Orange Mile and attended Melrose High School. That was an awesome experience, just like junior high. I think about my junior high experience – there were about five guys that sat around English class together. Three of those guys wanted to be attorneys. Two of us wanted to be businessmen.

And I think about from 12 years old we were talking. And one of those attorneys is Jack Payne, a city attorney with the city of Memphis. One of those attorneys now is Dorsey Hobson – he just – now he's over in our unified school district. One of those attorneys is our US District Attorney, Ed Stanton. Those two guys who wanted to be in business, one is an accountant and me, I quit my corporate aspirations and entrepreneur aspirations aside –

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for Knowledge Quest. So, I tell them I'm the social entrepreneur. But it's kids. And I tell children now, "We started at 11 – 12 years old and all of us got what we wanted out of life but that's where our dreams began." So, junior high and high school was where I thought I was the Mayor of Melrose so I loved that experience. Orange Mile, oldest African American community in Memphis, there was so much love.

You have an alumni association that would be on par with some colleges out at that high school. So, my school experience overall was awesome. I left there – went to Le Moyne-Owen College, which is my neighborhood historic black college university and from there, I went to Memphis Theological Seminary for a Master of Divinity Degree that's also here in Memphis.

Sumita Montgomery: What church or churches have you attended?

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Marlon Foster: I've attended church in the same building my whole life from the time I was in my mother's womb and that happens to be the church that I now pastor. So, it's also on the campus of Knowledge Quest. Actually, Knowledge Quest got its own campus by sharing space with our church. So, seven years into Knowledge Quest founding, which is my first job out of college, my wife and I founded Christ Quest Community Church. And that church that just turned nine years old is in that same building of my youth.

So, it has had two different names but for me, it's been the same building and same faith, house of worship context.

Sumita Montgomery: And can you describe this church?

Marlon Foster: Wow. When I grew up in it as Corinthian, it was – we best described by about 23 generation –

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families. In that whole church, if you imagine three generations – that was really the makeup of the church. So, it was a family scaled church. Maybe 200 people would show up every week. But it was very family oriented.

The founding pastor was there of my youth who baptized me. From that point, we had one additional pastor. So, there's only been two pastors of that church in its 70 plus year history. But it was a very close-knit, family environment. My family was very involved.

My grandfather was best friends with the founding pastor. My stepfather was the Chairman of the Deacon's Board which is a major ministry of the management of the church. My mother was financial secretary all my life. My uncle was a Deacon. I mentioned my grandfather and stepfather being a Deacon – my brother was the assistant pastor and –

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he got that promotion from Youth Pastor. So, folks said, “Man, the whole church is just your family.” But no, my family had just been there a long time. My grandmother was over the youth department. Can you imagine a grandmother supposed to be ___ but that's the kind of grandmother I had that was hip, she was current and she ran the Youth Department for about 20 – 30 years.

So, that was that experience. Now what has happened with Christ Quest as families get older and they move out of the neighborhood, they church had turned into people that drove in. Now, it's a community church. It's about 80 percent unchurched or people who have been out of church for a long time. The average age of baptism is probably in the mid-30s.

When I was a kid, at that same building was always children. So, it's a totally different experience where someone will be there that may pull up in literally, a Mercedes and someone else who was homeless –

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and were in there worshipping together. So, it's a unique experience that's very different and new and authentic and real special to me.

Sumita Montgomery: How has Christ Quest Community Church impacted the South Memphis community?

Marlon Foster: Wow. I think it's just the stories. It's all lived out through the stories so that's all I can speak to. Just hearing the stories of what this community of faith and the way we approach ministry which

is outside the walls. It's we approach it through a spirit of liberation.

Everybody has a voice. Everybody has a place. If 100 – 150 people show up, over half are under 18 so it's very young and lively and the children actually are leaders on every scale. They have a voice. So, yeah, but there was **testimonies**.

You have to have a place where people that kind of turned their back on their faith or really weren't churchy to now be able to find

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love and find the faith – having meaning in their life through that experience. I think that's just invaluable. But we do ministries like Feed and Seed. We still do **Frontierism** – we're going door to door, we're hanging outside. We do a lot of things like Glamour and Glory where the assets that are within the church are the beauticians and barbers and some – you know, we come up, get your hair done. You may have a nice conversation over getting your hair dried. But we do that.

We do a lot of gathering around tables. So, for nine years, the community – we have breakfast together every Sunday morning. We have dinner together every first Sunday. Every quarter we celebrate everyone's birthday. So, there's a lot of gathering around tables, a lot of just authentic worship from my understanding.

Sumita Montgomery: What does the future hold for Christ Quest and South Memphis?

Marlon Foster: Wow.

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I think we're just trying to – to serve a leadership is something we speak of all the time. Not only serve up leadership – this whole idea of doing with, this whole idea of stewardship. So, we see our relevance, our very existence and even our activity coming out of us just coming alongside. So, although we maybe do have some dreams or some visions of just trying to be that present of the faith, to be solid in light – what that looks like is determined by the community and what's real and relevant on that particular day at that particular time. So, things like the community garden, that came out of churches in the neighborhood saying, “This is what we need.”

So, Christ Quest, Knowledge Quest, we're a steward over the farm. We'll fundraise. We'll give up land. We'll steward –

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the property but it belongs to everyone. So, that's kind of our way of being. We see ourselves as kind of stewards – this kind of doing with. And we just want to – if we can keep that principle in place, we feel like whatever the outcome is, it's gonna be great. So, the emphasis is always on the “how.”

So, we know why. There are a whole lot of “what's.” But we really focus in on the how because we think that's where the faith is really lived out.

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