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Mildred Harris, 2009

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Paris Westbrook: Okay. On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom we would like to thank you for participating in this interview. And for the record could you state your name, please?

Mrs. Harris: My name is Mildred Harris.

Paris Westbrook: Mildred Harris. And what year were you born?

Mrs. Harris: Nineteen thirty-one.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And where were you raised?

Mrs. Harris: Oakland, Tennessee.

Paris Westbrook: Oakland, Tennessee. And where is that in relation to Memphis?

Mrs. Harris: It's about 30 – not quite – about 30 miles from Memphis.

Paris Westbrook: Thirty miles from Memphis?

Mrs. Harris: Mm-hmm.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And can you tell us what it was like growing up in Oakland, Tennessee?

Mrs. Harris: Very hard because we was – I was raised on a farm. Raised in a household. My mother was the mother of 13 childrens, which 11 of us – 2 died but it was 11, and there's 9 of us living now. So we had gardens. We had to chop cotton, pick cotton because that's how our parents made their living.

Paris Westbrook: And what did your parents do?

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Paris Westbrook: Were they sharecroppers?

Mrs. Harris: They were sharecroppers. Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. How long did you live in Oakland, Tennessee?

Mrs. Harris: From 1 to 19.

Paris Westbrook: From 1 to 19. And when did you move to Memphis, at the age of 19?

Mrs. Harris: I was – yeah, because I moved here in '51.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Why did you decide to move to Memphis?

Mrs. Harris: Well, I had finished high school, and I decided I was tired of staying at home and taking care of children. So I decided I would move to Memphis. I came to Memphis. I lived with my cousin where she was on Bluff Avenue at that time to get a job. And the first job that I got was at Roberson Drug Store on Main Street.

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Paris Westbrook: So backtrack a little bit. What elementary school did you go to in Oakland, Tennessee?

Mrs. Harris: I went to Smith and Matthews. I went to two different elementary schools.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: I went to Smith Rosenwall?.

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Mrs. Harris: Smith was a [Inaudible] Rosewall? school, and Matthews was just a regular elementary school.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And what middle school and high school did you go to?

Mrs. Harris: I went to Fair-Fayette County Training School in Somerville, the summer inville Tennessee.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And what was – what were your school years like?

Mrs. Harris: They was good. We was bussed. Children thinking now that they are bussed to school. But I was bussed to school because I had to pay \$0.50 a week to ride the bus to Fair-Fayette County Training School.

Paris Westbrook: And how far was your home from your school?

Mrs. Harris: Approximately 15 or 16 miles.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Wow. Did you participate in any activities growing up, sports or, I don't know, cheerleading?

Mrs. Harris: I didn't have time. I was helping my mother to raise my sisters and brothers.

Paris Westbrook: Did religion play a role in your life growing up?

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Mrs. Harris: I would say so because I was – I started out with the Sunshine Band at ~~my~~ church. Then I went to the Red Circle, and then I went to the young adult people~~s~~. And then from there I went to junior choir. So I was kind of in church at all times, Sunday school every Sunday.

And then while I was a junior [usher²](#), by that time I had finished high school, and I left and came to the city.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Where you lived, you said you lived on the farm. Were there any surroundings [families](#) in the area that you lived in?

Mrs. Harris: Right. Right.

Paris Westbrook: There were?

Mrs. Harris: Yes.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. How many families were there?

Mrs. Harris: Oh, quite a few. We were surrounded by families. Some was relatives and some wasn't relatives.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And were most of the families' parents, were they also sharecroppers?

Mrs. Harris: Right. Everybody sharecroppers.

[\[00:04:00\]](#)

Paris Westbrook: Okay. You said you moved to Memphis at the age of 19.

Mrs. Harris: Yes.

Paris Westbrook: And you came to stay with your cousin.

Mrs. Harris: Right.

Paris Westbrook: Now, what did you – once you got to Memphis what did you do? Like what job did you pick up or did you go to school?

Mrs. Harris: No, I didn't go to school. I got a job. Like I said, I worked at Roberson Drug Store that was on Main Street downtown.

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Paris Westbrook: Okay. Were there a lot of young black women working at Roberson Drug Store?

Mrs. Harris: Yes, it was. Mostly young womens that was just in school, and during the summer that's what they would do, work at Roberson Drug Store.

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hmm. And when you came to Memphis what did you think of the city compared to Oakland and where you were from?

Mrs. Harris: It was a godsend to me because I was out of the country. *(Laughs)*

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: Of course where I lived on – the street was called Bluff. It was right at the city dump.

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Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: So it was one step up from being in the country. Of course, they didn't have street lights. They didn't have sidewalks or anything. But it was better than being in the country.

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Paris Westbrook: Did you guys – did you and your cousin live in like a house or an apartment?

Mrs. Harris: A house.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: Yeah, a house.

Paris Westbrook: And it was just you and your cousin?

Mrs. Harris: No. It was – I lived with her, her husband and two other young ladies, which was my cousins.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. So how many of your family members were actually in Memphis?

Mrs. Harris: Just her and her brother at that time.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: She had a brother that lived also in Memphis.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Did your mom have any thoughts on you coming to Memphis?

Mrs. Harris: Well, at first she says no, but then my daddy said let her go.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: And they let me go.

Paris Westbrook: What was – you said it was called Bluff?

[00:06:00]

Mrs. Harris: Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: What was that neighborhood like?

Mrs. Harris: They called it **Belmont**. It was really – like I said, we stayed right on the city dump, so you can imagine it wasn't a very nice place to stay. You had a lot of flies, but they would come and spray it. But at that time that's where.

It was like country because they raised chicken, hogs, so it was just the only different where I wasn't in the country, but it was ~~in~~ the another country. Because the street cars, we didn't have street – well, we had street cars, but we had to walk a long ways, I would'd say a half mile, to get to a street car.

Paris Westbrook: What were the people like in your neighborhood? Was it a mostly black neighborhood?

Mrs. Harris: Black. All black.

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Mrs. Harris: But most of them they owned their own home.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Mrs. Harris: Most of them owned their own home. Belmont is just a little small neighborhood, community like, but it's a part of Hyde Park. When Belmont stopped, it stopped at ~~Trezevaent~~ and then Hyde Park picked up from there.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What were the occupations of like your neighbors and people throughout the neighborhood? Did they do the same thing that you did?

Mrs. Harris: They worked in homes. Most of them worked in homes.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Now, how long did you work at the Robeson Drug Store?

Mrs. Harris: I didn't work there too long because my cousin got me a job working for two sisters. There was two ladies, and I worked for them for \$3.75 a week.

[00:08:00]

Paris Westbrook: And what did you do working for them?

Mrs. Harris: I cleaned their house. I washed and ironed their clothes.

Paris Westbrook: And were the people that you worked for, were they black or white?

Mrs. Harris: They were white.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Where did they live?

Mrs. Harris: They lived kind of in midtown. And she would give me \$3.75 a week, like I say. For lunch she ~~would~~ give me two peanut butter crackers, and I would have to sit on the porch with a mop and broom to eat.

Paris Westbrook: What – how long did you work for that family or those two sisters?

Mrs. Harris: I worked for them, I guess, about six months. And I probably would have been there longer because I didn't know anybody in the city, and I just wanted to make a living for myself. But a young man, which worked at the grocery store in the neighborhood, he came up and said why are you out here pulling grass?

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Mrs. Harris: I said because she asked me to. He said she never asked no one else to do that. And she heard him. She got him fired. She called the grocery and had him fired. And when she did that I quit.

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Paris Westbrook: Where did you work at after you stopped working for the two sisters?

Mrs. Harris: I went to a laundry, half-a-day laundry on union.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And how long did you work there?

Mrs. Harris: I worked there – I don't know how long I worked there. I worked there for quite some time.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And what was working there like compared to working for the two sisters and working at the drug store?

Mrs. Harris: Much better. Much, much better.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: Yes, it was.

Paris Westbrook: Did you enjoy it?

Mrs. Harris: I enjoyed that. I sure did.

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Paris Westbrook: Okay. During this time period do you remember anything as far as civil rights and race relations? Can you give us an explanation or a description of what it was like for you during that time period, as far as race relations and civil rights goes?

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Mrs. Harris: During that time period I went back to a private home, but I was making much more money. And it was a little scary because during the time when Martin Luther King was here, we had troops that went up and down the streets. And I remember one specific thing that happened that really frightened me.

My children was in the yard. I had married and I had my children. They was in the yard playing, and I was sitting on the porch watching them. And the troops came with their guns drawn and

made us get in the house. In the house. They couldn't even sit on the porch. We couldn't sit on the porch. And my children was frightened to death. And I got them in the house, and I was standing in the window watching out the windows to go up and down the street.

That frightened me very, very much because I didn't quite understand what was going on.

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Mrs. Harris: But at that time there was rioting in the city. They was breaking out store windows and all of this stuff, so they had to be there to keep the peace. But it was frightening.

Paris Westbrook: Now, this was during the sanitation strike, you said?

Mrs. Harris: Right.

Paris Westbrook: Was this before or after Dr. King had died?

Mrs. Harris: It's – I think this was after he was killed.

Paris Westbrook: To backtrack a little bit, you said you have children.

Mrs. Harris: Yes.

Paris Westbrook: How many children or kids do you have?

Mrs. Harris: Four.

Paris Westbrook: Four?

Mrs. Harris: Yes.

Paris Westbrook: And are they all girls or boys or...?

Mrs. Harris: One girl and three boys.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And did you have to raise them by yourself or were you –

Mrs. Harris: Yes. My husband and I separated when they was real young, so I had to raise them by myself. Partially I was on welfare for six years. I got a job working at a nursing home, and when I went to the nursing home I asked to be released from welfare.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: And they did but one thing that was nice —

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Mrs. Harris: - about that they let my case stay open for a whole year just in case that I needed that help again. But thank the good lord; I made it on my own.

Paris Westbrook: Before the sanitation strike, what were race relations like in Memphis as far as segregation and you living in the all-black community and then going to wherever you were working and things of that nature?

Mrs. Harris: The only thing I really had a problem with was that riding a street car. There would be lots of seats on the street car, but we had to go to the back. And if there was — some **old** white would get on the bus and they wanted our seat in the back we would have to get up and give them our seat.

Paris Westbrook: And how did that shape your views of white people and segregation and things of that nature?

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Mrs. Harris: Well, at that time with me being raised in the country I didn't think too much of it. I didn't think too much of it. I said, well, this was just a way of life. But as I got older I felt different, that I felt like all humans should be treated equal, not because of the color of your skin. You shouldn't have to get up and give someone else your seat.

And when that was — it would be plenty of seats maybe at the front, and if you got on the bus you still couldn't sit in there. You would have to stand up with plenty seats there. But after you passed the back door, that's where you would have to sit on the street car.

Paris Westbrook: When — once the sanitation strike had started and Dr. King had came to Memphis, did you have any thoughts or did you feel a certain way about the things that were going on around you?

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Mrs. Harris: Things was changing, and it seemed like it – well, I know it was for the better. Things were changing because we got busses that would come much closer. We didn't have to walk a long ways. When we'd go downtown we could drink from any fountain, water fountain because before then they had colored fountains and white fountains. And you had to drink from the colored fountains, which was all the same water. But you just couldn't drink from the other fountain.

Paris Westbrook: How did you explain segregation to your children?

Mrs. Harris: My daughter and I, we had this – I guess the same views of things, that people are people, regardless to what color their skin were, and treat everybody the same. Be kind. Don't think about what people's call you =

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Mrs. Harris: - because you're going to be called names, but you ignore that. Always remember that you're a human being and God loves you. That's what I always taught.

And I tell them – I would tell my children, like if I had to leave home or something, I'd say you see that picture up there? I had a picture of Jesus on the wall. I'd say, "You see that picture up there?" I said, "You do something wrong or say something wrong he's going to tell me because he hear everything that you say." And they believed it. They truly believed it.

Begin Segment 4: [00:15:33:29]

Paris Westbrook: Did your kids have any bad experiences as far as, I don't know, segregation and race relations during the time period that they were growing up?

Mrs. Harris: Yes, some of them did.

Paris Westbrook: And how did you deal with that as a –

Mrs. Harris: When they first started to school the school started being integrated. I had one son that had a problem with that because he was kind of hypery?, got a little **temper** there.

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Mrs. Harris: -And this little boy called him a nigger. He did not like that. And as usual, this little boy got a lick, which I was called to the office. I had – he was suspended from school, and I had to go get him back in school.

Well, I didn't too much like that, but I had to talk to my child and tell him you're still – you're a human being. Don't care what people's call you. It don't make you be one. I said only reason he said that is because of the color of your skin. I said but anybody – anybody can be one. I said if they're mean they are one. So don't ever let that bother you no more.

[00:16:57]

Paris Westbrook: Did you continue – as you started to have children and switched jobs, did you continue to live on Bluff, or did you move elsewhere?

Mrs. Harris: No. The street changed to Blue Road, but once it was Blue Road then I got married. Then I lived on Harrison Street. And I lived on Harrison until 1968, and then I moved where I'm living now, and I've been there since 1968.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What was the community – before you moved in 1968, what was that community, your neighborhood like?

Mrs. Harris: Working black people.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. After the sanitation strike had occurred and after Dr. King had died, did you notice – not did you notice, but how did the city change and how did your neighborhood and community that you lived in change?

Mrs. Harris: By that time I had moved to where I am now, so when we moved over there =

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Mrs. Harris: - the community was half and half, half black, half white. So it continued ~~white there~~like that until most of the white died out. They did not move. I think if you go back and check they had a big ~~riot~~-write up about our neighborhood because it was a neighborhood where the black and white lived together and we didn't have no problems.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: It was really nice.

Paris Westbrook: Were you involved in any, like, community organizations?

Mrs. Harris: The neighborhood watch, yes. I participated with the neighborhood watch, which we ~~were~~ all black and white. We'd meet together at a Springdale school for our meetings, and then we'd have our nights out, and everybody would ~~be together~~.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. After you said all the whites had died out in the neighborhood, did the neighborhood continue to stay the same,

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Paris Westbrook: - or did it change, or did it gradually change?

Mrs. Harris: Not that much. It ~~didn't change~~ not that much.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Mrs. Harris: Yeah. We had some people still move in that we didn't feel like they was kind of welcome, but we eventually got them out. We signed petition because they had to kind of stay up to code with the rest of the peoples in the neighborhood.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And what did those codes consist of?

Mrs. Harris: Well, when they moved in they would play music in the backyard real loud. They would throw parties and would get loud and everything. Kind of rowdy. And the people just didn't like that. So when we had our neighborhood watch meeting we would talk about things like that. And we would get with the owners – of course they was a rental house. We would get with the owners that rent those houses and make our fears known to them.

Begin Segment 5: [00:19:58]

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And how many people participated in like the neighborhood community watch, was it the majority of the neighborhood?

Mrs. Harris: The majority of the neighborhood, yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. So you guys had a cohesive community?

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Mrs. Harris: Right. I guess that's what you would call it, yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. To go back to the history of Memphis, you said you lived on Bluff?

Mrs. Harris: Bluff. When I first came to Memphis it was Bluff.

Paris Westbrook: It was Bluff.

Mrs. Harris: Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Is that anywhere near the Hollywood Dump?

Mrs. Harris: Hollywood Dump over here, residents over here. That's the best way I can describe it.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And how did the other residents feel about the dump and then the Hollywood Bluff where you guys lived? How did that, I guess, make the community feel? And how did everybody deal with that?

Mrs. Harris: Well, I think most of the peoples at that time were just glad to have a place to stay.

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Mrs. Harris: They didn't like it, but that was the best that they could do at that time. And as their children grew up and started moving out, then things started changing a little bit.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember anything about the theater, the black owned theater that was in Hollywood?

Mrs. Harris: Yes.

Paris Westbrook: Did you ever go to the movies at that theater?

Mrs. Harris: I went to Hyde Park Theater, yeah, and then finally we got Hollywood, which it was black and white could go there.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What about Cypress Creek, do you remember any -?

Mrs. Harris: I was in several meetings with the Cypress Creek development because Mr. Green was the one that started the thing with Cypress Creek. And I made several of those meetings with him.

Paris Westbrook: And what was the community's thoughts and concerns about the creek?

Mrs. Harris: Memory's not that good right now.

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Paris Westbrook: Okay. Do you remember anything about the closing of West Drive in Hyde Park?

Mrs. Harris: Yes. I do remember that. I was at a council meeting, and during this council meeting, what happened someone went drove there because you could drive through Hyde Park, and a man hit a dog and killed that dog. He didn't do it intentionally. The dog just ran out in front of his car. And then they wanted to close it, so that nobody could go through that.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, wow.

Mrs. Harris: That's why it was closed.

Paris Westbrook: What was the – what were the community members thoughts on closing the park, was everybody – or closing that area? Was everybody in kind of an uproar, or were they just like, okay, we can go ahead and close it?

~~*Paris Westbrook*~~-*Mrs. Harris:* No, they wasn't. They did not like that because they felt like just because one dog was killed, why close a community so nobody could go through there? And some at one time was saying -

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Mrs. Harris: - that they should protest because only peoples that could go in was people that worked for the people, but nobody else was allowed.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. To fast forward a little bit, you said you worked at a laundry service, and you worked there for a very long time. Is that what you ended up doing for the rest of your working years?

Mrs. Harris: No, I worked at a nursing home for 31 years.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Okay. And you retired there?

Mrs. Harris: I retired from the nursing home.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. And what do your children do? Did they all move to different parts of the area, or are they all still in Memphis?

Mrs. Harris: They're all still in Memphis. Stop. We ain't gonna talk about them. *(Laughs)*

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Do you have any significant memories or significant events that changed your life or anything of that nature?

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Mrs. Harris: I guess getting married to my second husband, which is a very good man. I think that really changed me because I had some stability in my life. I wasn't struggling trying to raise four kids by myself. He helped me.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What would you say your proudest moment of your life was?

Mrs. Harris: Proudest moment of my life I guess would be that we bought that home. Got me away from Belmont. Moved me into a better neighborhood, which we really enjoy. And just – I don't know.

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Mrs. Harris: I had my self security. I think that would be the proudest thing. I feel safe that I have that ~~—feeling of security—~~ [to](#) now.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Looking back is there any advice you would give yourself or younger people like me, anything you would say or would do, I don't know, words of warning?

Mrs. Harris: Be prayerful. Have love in your heart for everybody – everybody. And thank God every day that you wake up.

Paris Westbrook: Well, on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Mrs. Harris, we would like to thank you for doing this interview with us.

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