

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

Danny Cook, 2014

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*Blair Smith:* All right. Good afternoon. Today is June 19<sup>th</sup>. And, on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and Team for Success, we'd like to thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. My name is Blair Smith. Today's interview will be archived only at the Crossroads to Freedom website. And, just to start things off, could you please state some background information, like what is your name?

*Danny Cook:* Okay, my name is Danny Cook.

*Blair Smith:* All right, Mr. Cook. And, if you don't mind, can you tell us what year you were born?

*Danny Cook:* I was born in 1957.

*Blair Smith:* All right. 1957. And, were you raised here in Lake County?

*Danny Cook:* Actually, I was raised in Hickman, Kentucky. I started school in Union City, Tennessee and then I moved to Hickman, Kentucky. So, basically Hickman was my home growing up, which is just about 25 miles away from here across the line.

*Blair Smith:* All right. And, what brought you to Lake County?

*Danny Cook:* I came to Lake County because of my wife. I was working in Dyersburg, Tennessee, and I met my wife who was born and raised in Tiptonville.

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And, she was able to convince me that this was the greatest place in the world to live. So, here I am.

*Blair Smith:* True love.

*Danny Cook:* Yes. Greatest day of my life when I met her.

*Blair Smith:* And, do you have any kids?

*Danny Cook:* I have two children, yes.

*Blair Smith:* All right, and what ages are they and names?

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*Danny Cook:* Okay, I have a son named Drew Cook, who's 26, and I have a daughter who's 22 and her name is Alison Cook.

*Blaire Smith:* And, you raised them here in Lake County?

*Danny Cook:* I raised them here. Do you need to know what they do?

*Blaire Smith:* Sure.

*Danny Cook:* Okay, Alison is a senior at U.T. Martin. And, my son is in his last year of law school at Nashville School of Law. So, they both grew up Lake County High School, Lake County Elementary School. Everything they had until they went to college was in Lake County.

*Blaire Smith:* Can you tell us a little bit about raising a family here in Lake County? How that was for you.

*Danny Cook:* I enjoyed it a lot. By growing up in Hickman, I was used to the small town. Hickman is very similar in size to Tiptonville.

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And, of course, my wife was very happy with this being her hometown. And, I work in Dyersburg, which is slightly larger and had gone to school in a bigger city. And, I just am more comfortable in the small towns. I like the fact that everybody knows everybody. That they know where you live, even though it has disadvantages, there's a lot of advantages. Your kids – everybody knows who they are. They watch out for them. Teachers – everybody knows who they are. And, you just feel like it's a safer environment where you're comfortable with your neighbors, you're comfortable with your friends. And, I just really like the small town feel. It's just my type of lifestyle I like better.

*Blaire Smith:* Good. Good. Okay, well, now we're going to switch a little bit to your life growing up. Who were your role models would you say growing up?

*Danny Cook:* My parents, definitely. I had great parents. I was an only child. So, I was very close to my parents. We did everything together, and they were great role models for me. They taught me how to treat people.

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To treat people like I'd want to be treated myself. Be respectful to folks. And, taught me to go to school and work hard, and if you want to succeed, get as much education as you can. And, just don't be looking for people to say, "Here it is," but you've got to be willing to make your own mark. And, they gave me a lot of freedom and great guidance. If they thought I did something wrong, they'd say, "Hey, let's get back." I was very proud with my parents. They were my ultimate role models, I have to say. And, I had good neighbors and friends, but my parents were my ultimate role models.

*Blaire Smith:* So, would you say that they definitely influenced your path – the path that you took as going into adulthood?

*Danny Cook:* Without a doubt. They were right there for me. They supported me in what I did. In school you play ball – they go to all your games. If you have some kind of ceremony at school, they're right there for you. And, they didn't try to tell me what choice in life to make as far as an occupation. But, when I felt what I wanted to do, they were behind me 100 percent and said, "Whatever it takes, you go for it. We'll do our best to support you."

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I like to say that I thought that was a great a thing as parents could do to know that they're there to support you and do whatever they can to give you opportunities.

*Blaire Smith:* All right. Now, you spoke a little bit about your occupation, but can you just for the record state exactly what you do?

*Danny Cook:* Yes. I am actually a funeral director. That's my real job. I'm the mayor of Tiptonville – of course, we're a small town. So, mayor is not a fulltime job. Been mayor for 17 years, but my real occupation is a funeral director. And, I work in Dyersburg. I went to college at Murray State. Graduated from there and went to mortuary school in Lewisville, Kentucky. Graduated there and then came back and have worked in Dyersburg ever since. It's a very satisfying job. It sounds bad to some people, but it's – you have a very unique position and you provide an opportunity to help someone at their hardest time. It's a very fulfilling job, and you feel like you're actually making a contribution to your community.

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*Blaire Smith:* Good. And, were there any factors that influenced your decision to take the role on as mayor, or your other job?

*Danny Cook:* Well, I was – of course, I wanted to go in the funeral business when I was young. I had nobody in the business, but it always fascinated me when I was in elementary school. It just fascinated me. So, I just studied it as much as I could. I tried to learn as much and I felt very early on that was the position I wanted to do to make a living. But, as far as the mayor position, I've always enjoyed politics my whole life. When I was a kid I watched the news. And, I could always tell you who the president was, who the governors were, who the senators were. I just kept up with politics. It was fascinating to me. And, I knew when I got up into the adult world and when I got established I knew that somehow or another I wanted to be involved in some type of a political organization.

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When the opportunity came up when I was living in a small town that the ottoman position, I decided that the most important political position is something that's close that has an effect on your every day life. And, so I ran for ottoman and was fortunate enough to be elected. And, then after that I ran for mayor. And, then I've been fortunate enough to be elected every time since then. It's been a good experience.

*Blaire Smith:* Good. Good. Now, what would you say would be the best part of your job? Both of your jobs?

*Danny Cook:* Getting to do stuff like this. Getting to meet folks and hopefully contribute to something that's going to be helpful to other folks out there, and give them a positive attitude about government, about small towns, about Lake County. That's the great thing with that part. And, being mayor, you have the opportunities to try to help your city. You try to get jobs. You try to get industry. You try to help with people who have problems. You know, it's great if people have legitimate problems – you try to be there to give them assistance. And, it's been very satisfying. Same with my job where I make a living.

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If you do what you're supposed to do right, people will appreciate your work and they'll always thank you for what you do because you've helped them at a bad time. And, as long as the positives are

better than the negatives, just stay with it. That's the way I look at it.

*Blaire Smith:* Well, you spoke a lot about how your job is to help people. You talked a lot of about industry. We have recently learned about the river port that's currently in development here in Lake County. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, or what it will mean to the Lake County community?

*Danny Cook:* We're very blessed with our geography here in Lake County. We have a unique position up on the river with the bend and the way the geography lays out. We have an area that other places would give anything to have. And, we're fortunate that the property around it is empty, so there's a lot of room for expansion. We've had some very forward thinking people over the years to recognize that possibility there.

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Pursued it, and you've got enough folks in the business world, and now the political world who've all come together at the right time. And, the thing about a project like that – a small town like Tiptonville or Lake County can't do it by themselves. You've got to have regional appeal. We've got Dyer County, Obion County, and Lake County. You have the state – the state senators, state representatives, U.S. senators, U.S. representatives, the governors, the senators. You've got so many organizations that have come together on this. It has the potential to change all of the northwest Tennessee area. Of course, the port project itself now is completed, and they have now hired a port operator who has contacts out, who their job is to actually get the word out there, "Hey, we have a great facility in Lake County Tennessee. You need to come look at it." And, I think we have an unlimited potential.

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One of the things that is so good about it is there's so much room for growth, and we're willing to go in any kind of direction. Anything that will provide jobs is great. And, we could go in any type of manufacturing. Not just agricultural, but heavy manufacturing. There's so many options with the rail spurs, with the highways y'all saw coming in. The railroad work is being done. The paving is being done – expanding the high way. I think the state and federal government would not expend this much money if they did not feel this was a tremendously valuable project.

*Blaire Smith:* You spoke a little bit about this project creating more jobs for people. Most of the people that we've interviewed have said that to find a job in this area, you have to travel outside of Tiptonville. You know, go into Dyersburg. Most people are commuting. Do you think the river port will provide jobs for this community? Fitting jobs for this community?

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*Danny Cook:* I think it will, and the good thing about it, hopefully, if it's mostly manufacturing jobs, it should be well paying jobs that people would want to stay here for. And, that's the thing that every little town out there I think wants. I think they want the opportunity for their kids to have a reason to stay here where they are. And, if this will come, I feel, if we can get at least one project started then hopefully that will grow to two, and will grow to three. And, like my children – I would like for my children to both come back to this area. And, if you have a port situation, you've got an opportunity to, "Hey, I don't have to go to Dyersburg, or Jackson, or Memphis to get a job." There's lots of quality people that come from Lake County High School who would make great employees, and would love to stay here. And, I think we need to do everything we can to keep them here.

*Blaire Smith:* Well, the river port has definitely a targeted skill set. So, will there be any training for people to acquire those jobs?

*Danny Cook:* Of course, the key is I think that the high school – the basic elementary school and high school – they need a good foundation.

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And, I was very happy with the education my children both received here. So, you've got to have the quality there and the kids to be motivated to take advantage of it. And, I think, of course, college is going to be extremely helpful for anyone. May not be four years for everybody, but I think it's such a good learning experience. You learn more than just what your major is, of course. But, I think that the education will help no matter what your job is. You need as much education as possible. And, I think these are jobs with computers, with mechanization as it is. With technology it's so different. It's not like the old days when everybody would – you know, back in the old days, everybody would farm. Take a shovel or a hoe. But, more complicated than that now, and

education is the key to it. The more you know, the more equipped you'll be for your job.

*Blaire Smith:* Well, good. A lot of people that we've interviewed have talked about Lake County and the vision of Lake County.

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And, how some parts of the city lack vision. Being the mayor of Tiptonville, I'd imagine that you have a vision for what you want Lake County to look like, or things in that nature. So, what would you say the vision is for you?

*Danny Cook:* Okay. Well, first, I would hope that everybody does have a vision. Maybe some people feel the vision is more viable than other people do. But, I hope that everybody in our town has a vision that we can improve and get better. My goal is that Tiptonville will be one of those places that other people look at and say, "Hey, you know what? Instead of everybody leaving there, they may have something that we want to go to." That's a location to think about instead of a location to get away from. And, our vision, of course, is to make it to where people – and I think we're very comfortable with that right now. We have people from all ends of the spectrum – from the racial lines, from the economic lines who have great relationships.

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Nothing is perfect in the world, but I think we have good relationships. And, everybody I think, by and large, tries to appreciate everyone else. And, we want everybody to have an opportunity. It doesn't matter who you are – if I can get a job, then you can get a job, and he can get a job, and she can get a job. And, we just want it to where it doesn't matter who you are – there's something out there for you. We're glad you're here.

*Blaire Smith:* Well, seeing as you've been in Tiptonville –

*Danny Cook:* Excuse me for that.

*Blaire Smith:* Oh, no. You're fine.

*Danny Cook:* I'm just looking to see. Okay, that's my wife.

*Blaire Smith:* It's an important call.



Danny Cook: She just probably wants to make sure where I am.

Blaire Smith: Oh, yeah. Well, I understand.

Danny Cook: I've all ready talked good about her.

Blaire Smith: Oh, yeah. We've got it on record.

Danny Cook: That's right. You got it on record then.

Blaire Smith: Well, seeing as you've been the mayor of Tiptonville for years now, what motivated you to stick around to stay here for so long and become involved?

Danny Cook: Well, as I said earlier, I love the small town and the people here were very nice. My wife's family was here. And, people were very nice to me.

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Very accommodating to me when I came in. They accepted me real well, and I just found some good friends. Found a good church home. And, I like the small town, so I wanted my kids to grow up here. Living for a while in the big city – nothing against the big city, but I just think the small town just has a uniqueness, and I just wanted my family to grow up here, and my wife felt exactly the same. And, I hope they'll want their kids to feel that way, too.

Blaire Smith: Makes sense. You've talked a lot about your kids growing up and you being influenced by some of your role models. What advice would you give to the youth of Tiptonville and Lake County today?

Danny Cook: Okay. I would tell the youth of Lake County that, number one, get your education. Stay in school. Find somebody that you admire and go talk to them. Try to pick their brain to see what makes them work. And, it doesn't matter who they are – man, woman, old, or young.

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But, somebody that they admire for whatever reason. Could be their job, their church, their civic work, their athletic ability – whatever it is, something about that person that they like and just go say, "Hey, talk to me. I want to stay here. I want to be a success. I like what you've done. How did you get where you are?"

And, I would like to see our younger people in the community – our older people and younger people getting together and getting on the same wave length and say, “Hey, I used to be where you are right now.” But, these young guys say, “I want to be where you are right now.” And, figuring out how to do that. And, I think communication together is the way. Just being willing to talk to folks and say, “Hey, go to school. Pay attention. Work hard. Don’t be afraid to sweat. Don’t expect everything to be handed to you on a silver platter. When you start your world of working, you’re going to start at the bottom and work your way up to the top. And, your top can be right here if you want to stop, or your top can be right here.” And, hopefully give them a positive outlook.

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*Blaire Smith:* More of the integrating of generations?

*Danny Cook:* Yes. Yes. We can’t get by without the younger folks, and the younger folks can’t get by without the older folks.

*Blaire Smith:* Exactly.

*Danny Cook:* And, I’m the younger folks, of course.

*Blaire Smith:* [Laughs] Now, this has been a question that we’ve asked all of our Danny Cooks. It could be a hard question or an easy question, depending on who you are. If you could describe Lake County in one word, what would it be?

*Danny Cook:* Home.

*Blaire Smith:* Home. And, why?

*Danny Cook:* Wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. I like the people. People been good to me, and I’ve enjoyed my life in Lake County. So, I’d say that. I don’t know if that’s the same answer you’ve gotten from other people or not.

*Blaire Smith:* That’s the first home we’ve gotten, I believe.

*Danny Cook:* Yeah, and home is comfortable. That’s where you like where you are. You feel safe. You feel comfortable. At peace. And, that’s it.

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*Blaire Smith:* You know, talking about being comfortable and stuff, we talked a little earlier about the prisoner's work program here. Can you talk to us a little bit about how they're involved in the community?

*Danny Cook:* Sure. Well, the sheriff is very gracious to allow the gentlemen to come out and work for us here. We're also fortunate with the state prison, which is in the city limits at the northern part of town. They have a program there where they have men who have skills in carpentry, painting, and different projects, and they come out with a crew that has done a lot of public service work. They've worked at churches. They've redone the movie theater downtown. And, that's great for us because they're able to do civic work. You get things done, which is less cost for the people here. And, then also it helps the guys who are incarcerated because it gives them something to do. Helps them to develop their skills. And, when they get out, they have – they're marketable right then.

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They've got the ability to get a job and get their life on track. And, I think it's been a good program for us. It's been very good for Lake County. They've rebuilt churches. I said the movie theater. They've really done a good job for Lake County.

*Blaire Smith:* Well, it sounds like that program has definitely been an asset to the community. And, as an organization, Crossroads to Freedom focuses on asset-based community development. Meaning, that we focus on institutions, ideas, and organizations that bring value to the communities. In your opinion, what are some of the biggest assets of Lake County?

*Danny Cook:* Biggest assets of Lake County. We've got some – oops, I'm sorry that that door's open.

*Blaire Smith:* Oh, no. You're fine.

*Danny Cook:* All right. Some of our biggest assets is we've got some good hardworking people that are very dedicated to their jobs. They enjoy living in small towns. I think that's one of our biggest assets. And, they don't mind working hard. We've got people who would do about anything that you need, and they help people.

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That's their thing – they will help you. If you need something, they're there. We've got friendships that are just as strong as can be.

*Blaire Smith:* The people have been very helpful here while we've been here.

*Danny Cook:* Good deal. I hope they have. I didn't want to hear that they'd been mean to you guys.

*Blaire Smith:* Oh, no. Not at all. Not at all. Well, we've talked about a lot – your occupation, what you do, how Lake County has changed, and all types of things. But, is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't talked about today?

*Danny Cook:* Well, I'm just proud that we have an opportunity to maybe help your situation there. And, I hope it will be helpful to Lake County that people see we have a good caring community of folks who want to be helpful and to be successful. And, I hope that this has helped your project to get the word out. And, I hope it hasn't hurt anything.

*Blaire Smith:* Oh, it's helped us tremendously. I promise that.

*Danny Cook:* Lake County – we have a bad reputation in some ways because we're economically depressed. And, we're in a difficult area in that we don't have the transportation background that some people do.

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And, it's just a lot of people look at that in a negative way. But, we look at it as that means our people are just that much more ready for things to burst loose and show the world what we got.

*Blaire Smith:* Exactly. Well, we just want to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project, and we enjoyed listening to your story.

*Danny Cook:* You're very welcome.

*Blaire Smith:* And, all the things you've been involved with. So, thank you.

*Danny Cook:* You're very welcome. I hope I was helpful to you. Good luck.

*Blaire Smith:* Oh, you definitely were.

*Danny Cook:* Thank you.

*[End of Audio]*