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Cora Hughes, 2014

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Cedrick Kimble: Today is June the 17th. 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. I am Cedrick Kimble. We are also honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived only at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you please, if you don't mind, state some background information starting with your name?

Cora Hughes: My name is Cora Hughes.

Cedrick Kimble: And, if you don't mind, could you please tell us in what year you were born?

Cora Hughes: Yes. I was born December the 29th, 1932.

Cedrick Kimble: And, were you born and raised in Lake County?

Cora Hughes: No, I was not born and raised in Lake County. I was born in Gibson County, Trenton, Tennessee.

Cedrick Kimble: Okay. Could you tell us what it was like growing up in Gibson County?

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Cora Hughes: Well, it was back then children played outside, and school was the most important thing in our lives. Of course, that was a time there were two separate schools. But, we enjoyed learning because we had a vision that one day we would not be in this situation. We would be in a better situation if we were educated. And, to be educated, we had to focus on learning and bettering ourselves.

Cedrick Kimble: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Cora Hughes: No, I had two brothers, and they have deceased. Had no sisters.

Cedrick Kimble: In what order – were you the oldest?

Cora Hughes: Okay, I was the baby.

Cedrick Kimble: So, could you tell us more about your home life – what that was like?

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Cora Hughes: Home life was great. Although, we had to walk to school, and when you got home from school you had chores to do. Starting about eight years old I was responsible for getting supper because my mom and daddy worked in Miland at an arsenic plant. And, after that, after supper you had to do the dishes. After doing dishes, you had homework. And, we had a happy life because I knew my mom and my dad was very positive in their raising. She only spoke one time – that was it. And, if it happened three times, that was something else that you didn't want to obtain.

Cedrick Kimble: Now I want to ask you about your educational experience. Did you attend Lincoln High School?

Cora Hughes: Did I do what now?

Cedrick Kimble: Did you attend Lincoln High school?

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Cora Hughes: No, I did not attend Lincoln High School because we lived in Detroit. We moved from Detroit to Tiptonville when I was in 11th grade. And, the reason we moved from Detroit to Lake County is so that my mom could take care of her dad. I attend school at McKenzie at Wells school. And, for that reason, I only had two choices of school that was at McKenzie and at Dyersburg Bruce. But, the reason I didn't go to Dyersburg Bruce was because there was no living facilities. So, I chose Well in McKenzie because they had a dormitory.

Cedrick Kimble: Okay. You said you were basically you went to school in Detroit?

Cora Hughes: Oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood you. My first schooling was at a little country school named Mount Orange in Trenton out in the country.

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Cora Hughes: And, then we moved from the country, went to the city of Trenton, and I attended High School. Left Rosenwall High School – we moved to Detroit. And, in Detroit I got my middle school, what you call today, education. And, two years of high school in Detroit, and then moved back to Tiptonville. And, that's when I attended Wells School and McKenzie. Finished there. After finishing there, I went to Lang College. Then after going to Lang College, I went to U.T. Martin for masters.

Cedrick Kimble: Back in the day when you were going to school, did y'all have to – what did you have to deal with segregation where there are like all black schools when you were going to school, or all white schools?

Cora Hughes: I never had the opportunity to attend mixed school.

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I went to all black schools. I only had that opportunity when I taught.

Cedrick Kimble: And, you taught – how did you fit in? Was it a problem? Did you have to face any conflicts or any situations?

Cora Hughes: Yes, I did. But, it was on a teacher and student basis. And, I don't know, my Grandmom always instilled in me that people were just people, regardless of what color they were or what size they were. And, you respect them for their character. And, if you show yourself friendly, and then other people show themselves friendly to you. And, I just had one incident when I was a transport to the Lake County High School as librarian with a young man.

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And, first with a young lady was a doctor's daughter. Had to let her know that I was an adult and she was a student. And, same with a young man. And, that was about the only controversy that I had the four years I taught.

Cedrick Kimble: If you don't mind, could you tell us when you started teaching?

Cora Hughes: I started teaching in 1955 at Morin Elementary School. And, out on a kind of like plantation-like. And, I taught there eight years, and then I moved from there. I came to Tiptonville to Lincoln. And, I taught at Lincoln about three years. And, then I moved from Lincoln to the Lake County High School. And, I stayed there until I retired.

Cedrick Kimble: How would you describe the atmosphere, being a teacher at Lincoln High School?

Cora Hughes: At Lincoln High School?

Cedrick Kimble: Yes, ma'am.

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Cora Hughes: Well, they were just normal kids – students like everybody else. You had some who wanted to and you had some that didn't want to. But, back in the day, your teachers knew what students really needed, and they spent their time molding them into what they need to be. Because, you can see in a student really what he needs or she needs to accomplish. So, that was worked on. And, it was instilled, "Now, look. To make a better day for your life, you gonna have to be educated. You're going to have to be able to master the printed page. And, when you master the printed page, it will kindly give you another outlook on life. You don't blame people if you don't do it because if you don't do it, it's your own fault. But, if you don't make it, it's nobody's fault but yours. You can't be like everybody else. You have to focus, and have a dream, know where you're going, and how you're going to get there."

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Cedrick Kimble: Could you describe Morin?

Cora Hughes: Morin?

Cedrick Kimble: Yes.

Cora Hughes: Okay. Morin was something like a plantation. African Americans weren't the only people that lived there. There were other Caucasians that lived there. And, the main focus was corn and cotton. You chopped cotton and you picked cotton. But, those students there wanted to see a better day. So, they just knew back then to see a better day, they had to know how to read, write. They knew that they need to know how to think for themselves.

Cedrick Kimble: Okay. Could you describe your – like, the churches you went to when you were younger, or your church in general?

Cora Hughes: Yeah, okay. Well, Sunday morning thing – we had to go to church.

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And, it was always the focus that Christ should always be first in your life. And, that to learn more about Christ, you had to attend Sunday school. You had to be involved. You just didn't go and sit on the front pew. You had to be involved. And, of course, they had things like Easter programs, and children day, and you had

speeches. And, in that case, the church had an involvement in that you spoke well – that you didn't mumble. Whatever you had to do, you had to learn. You didn't read. And, everybody was your mama. You know? If you didn't act right in church, they'd take you outside and kind of give you a little – you know – little, little, little – you know? And, then if you were chewing gum you had to not – or eating candy – that was a no-no.

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You didn't do that. So, everybody reared you, really.

Cedrick Kimble: Knowing that you had to be involved in church activities and what went on during church, or three-hour church, what did the church community mean to you?

Cora Hughes: It was my spiritual life that I knew that I wanted to be stronger in the Lord. I feared God, so there I learned that I needed to read my Bible more. And, I couldn't be like everybody else. They kind of instilled in you that you can't be like everybody else and be a Christian. You have to be like what the Holy Bible says you need to do. And, you need to kind of follow the word. So, like I say, if you got out of line and you were walking down the street, most of the time people set on the porch.

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And, they watched you. And, they would kind of call you down if you were rowdy. The church was a big involvement in our lives when we were children because, really, that was the biggest activity that we had was the community church.

Cedrick Kimble: If you could, would you tell us, growing up, who you would consider your role models?

Cora Hughes: Well, I considered as my role model my Sunday school teacher, my schoolteacher, my grandmother.

Cedrick Kimble: And, did you think they influenced the path that you took throughout your life?

Cora Hughes: Yes. I do think they did.

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Cedrick Kimble: Okay. Now, with the youth, what is some advice you would give to the youth of today's time in today's generation?

Cora Hughes: I would say to the youth today that to be focused and to be your own person. I would say to them it's so important to know how to meet people, and how to converse with people, and to be involved in what's going on. Be aware of what's going on around you. Say, like, what's going on in your community, and what's going on in your church, what's going on in your school.

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And, not to hang with the wrong crowd. My theory always been in life if you're not going anywhere, then you can't ride on my train. So, you know, I just think young people today can make it if you want to. But, I just don't see young people being involved in the right thing. You know, seems like we followed the wrong thing, and you become lazy. You don't read. You good people, but you want to be like everybody else. Just, I think everybody needs to be themselves.

Cedrick Kimble: What are some activities or even some ways you would suggest youth be more active in the community?

Cora Hughes: More active in the community?

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Adults or young people?

Cedrick Kimble: Young people.

Cora Hughes: Young people? Okay. I realize that we don't have a leading role. We don't have a plan to guide our young people in Lake County in various things. But, I think if young people would get more involved in community activities, and that – that's a hard one. That's a hard one.

Cedrick Kimble: Since we're on the subject of youth, do you have kids?

Cora Hughes: Yeah, I have one child and two grandkids.

Cedrick Kimble: And, how was it raising your family?

Cora Hughes: It was great because, like I say, when I reared my child it was a whole community thing. And, everybody in our little community down there on College Street was involved in helping me to do so.

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Cedrick Kimble: Looking over your life from early periods up until this moment, how would you say Lake County has changed? Or, has it not changed?

Cora Hughes: Well, it has changed. We've come from chopping cotton and picking cotton, and we have the only job thing we have is the prison. We haven't changed all that much.

Cedrick Kimble: While we're on the subject of change, is there anything in Lake County that you would like to see changed?

Cora Hughes: Yes, I would. I'd like to see more jobs. I would like to see more African Americans in positions.

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Like, for instance, the bank, and the courthouse, and the school system.

Cedrick Kimble: Do you think that segregation is still a big issue here in Lake County?

Cora Hughes: I don't foresee it being a big issue. I feel that the reason that we are where we are is because we don't become more active in things. And, we're quick to say we're left out. Yeah, we are left out if we don't have quality and qualified, certified people to step up and to be and to do things.

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You know, I don't see the youth crying out to say, "I want a better plan in Lake County for me growing up."

Cedrick Kimble: As an organization, Crossroads to Freedom focuses on assets-based community development. Meaning, that we focus on the institutions, ideas, and organizations that bring value to the community. In your opinion, what are some of the greatest assets in Lake County?

Cora Hughes: Well, one great asset, I guess, because we have a school system. Like I say, the prison. And, we have farmers that still farm.

Cedrick Kimble: Seeing that you live here in Lake County, are there certain things that's keeping you here, or is it just the life?

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Cora Hughes: That's a good question. I ask myself that. "Why are you still here? What good have you done?" And, I realize I have in my conscience that you plant a seed, it's going to eventually come up. But, I really don't know why I'm still here. I really don't.

Cedrick Kimble: If you could describe Lake County in – excuse me. If you could describe Lake County in one word, what would it be and why?

Cora Hughes: We need vision. Is that what you mean? Vision that will entail all people. And, set directions for a better outlook of our county, and not just accept things the way they are.

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Cedrick Kimble: Going back to back in the day when you was coming up and being raised, if you could bring back a tradition from back in the day, what would it be?

Cora Hughes: People – able-bodied people go to work. Work for your keep.

Cedrick Kimble: Going back to you, what is your occupation as of now?

Cora Hughes: My occupation now – I'm a retired teacher. I mow yards. Not only am I and about six others that's in my community, because I'm a person that things a community needs to look good.

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So, that's about it.

Cedrick Kimble: We talked about back in the day the schooling and you being a teacher, and different things about the community. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't discussed?

Cora Hughes: No. I don't...

Cedrick Kimble: Okay. We want to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project. And, we enjoy learning about your story today. So, once again, thank you.

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Cora Hughes: You're more than welcome.

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