



Evan Jones, 2014

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Shane Watson: Good afternoon. Today is June 19th, 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 Shane Watson. Today's interview will be archived only at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you please state some basic background information, like what is your name?

Evan Jones: My name is Evan Jones.

Shane Watson: Okay, and if you don't mind, can you tell us what year you were born in?

Evan Jones: Yes. I was born June 18th, 1951.

Shane Watson: All righty. And, were you born and raised in Lake County?

Evan Jones: I was born in Memphis, and my parents lived in Memphis. Don't know if it was a difficult birth or whatever, but she had to go to Memphis to have me. So, I've lived here my whole life. Never lived anywhere else.

Shane Watson: What was it like growing up in Lake County?

Evan Jones: It was fun. It was a small community. Everybody knows everybody. And, we all played sports together, and went to church together, and I feel like it was a great place to grow up because we got two great – we got the Mississippi River. The sun rises every morning over Reel Foot Lake and sets every evening over the Mississippi River. So, we feel lucky in that respect. And, it was a great place to grow up.

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Shane Watson: That had to be a good sight to see every day. Do you have any brother or sisters?

Evan Jones: I have three sisters, no brothers, one deceased. One sister deceased.

Shane Watson: I'm sorry to hear that. Were you the oldest?

Evan Jones: I'm the oldest.

Shane Watson: Okay. What was it like being the oldest of all your siblings?

Evan Jones: Well, my sisters all said I got treated like a king. I always said I was like a pawn - my parents kept me in the basement, fed me porridge. But, it was actually a bit of both. And, it was fun. Being the only boy and only boy and the older brother, you always kind of shepherd the younger sisters through school. But, it was good.

Shane Watson: And, you said that you guys were all – it was a community feeling. You guys all went to church together. What church did you attend?

Evan Jones: United Methodist Church in Tiptonville.

Shane Watson: Okay, and what does the church mean to you and your family?

Evan Jones: My sisters and my parents were both life long church members. And, as I went away to college and worked on the river, I kind of got out of it. And, I'm not an active church member now at all. But, my two living sisters are very much active in church. They attend every week.

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And, they are. So, but I've kind of strayed away. I told everybody I'm a backsliding Methodist. *[Laughs]* That's a pretty fair answer, I guess.

Shane Watson: You said you worked on the Mississippi River after college. What exactly did you do?

Evan Jones: I did. I worked on a survey crew for the Corps of Engineers. And, we worked from Greenville, Mississippi to Cairo. But, mostly we were between Tiptonville and Cairo, Illinois. And, we were actually out on the river. And, we had a huge flood in '73, and that's when I started. And, I stayed with it 'till '75 when I came back to work at the newspaper.

Shane Watson: Okay, can you tell us a little more about the flood if you know anything about it?

Evan Jones: Yeah, the flood in '73 at that time was the biggest one since the – I don't know if you've ever heard of the '37 flood, which was huge, the biggest flood. And, '73 and '75 were both huge floods until we had one here in 2011 that was the biggest of all time – bigger than any. But, we did flood fight work. We watched the levies. And, when the water actually receded, we did surveys to see where the

river had taken parts of the bank away, and where it needed to be repaired and things like that.

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Shane Watson: Okay, that's pretty cool. It's pretty cool. So, now I want to talk about your educational experiences as a child. Where did you attend elementary, high school, and all of that?

Evan Jones: I attended elementary in Margaret Newton Elementary here in Tiptonville, which is still here. And, I went to Lake County Middle School and Lake County High School. Graduated in 1969. And, then I attended UTM for two and a half years. I completed my sophomore year and we were on quarters back then, as opposed to semesters. And, I completed two quarters of my junior year. But, I dropped out then. So, I went to work on the river.

Shane Watson: Okay. And, do you have kids of your own?

Evan Jones: I do. I have a son, Jeremy, and a daughter, Katie.

Shane Watson: And, did you raise them here in Lake County?

Evan Jones: Yes. Yes.

Shane Watson: How was it like to raise a family in Lake County?

Evan Jones: It was great. It was a great. We all have our trials and tribulations as parents, but everybody pulls together and helps out their friends. And, everything was good.

Shane Watson: Nice. Nice..

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And, if any, who would you say were your role models growing up in this area?

Evan Jones: Well, my dad, first of all. And, my – I had a little league coach named Tootsie Homer who I actually worshiped then. He was always a role model for me. And, I really admired them. Some of the older guys I worked on the river with – which, they're younger than I am now, but they seemed ancient then. I really looked up to them. A couple of them are World War II guys. A couple of them Korean War guys. And, you know, they would tell war stories and

stuff. It was very interesting, and I always really wanted to emulate them.

Shane Watson: It had to be amazing to hear about those stories of all the wars they fought in. Would you say the influenced any of your – your role models influenced the path you chose in your life?

Evan Jones: Absolutely, yeah. Of course, I am a third generation newspaper. My grandmother ran a paper in Sheldon, Missouri. And, then my dad and his brother bought *The Banner* in 1949. So, I basically grew up in it. So, I was third generation newspaper guy.

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My son worked there for a while until he got a better job. So, he was – it's kind of a family thing.

Shane Watson: Okay. And, what would you say was the best part of working for the newspaper?

Evan Jones: The excitement of you never know what's going to come up the next day. You never know who's going to walk in the door. And, it's not always good. But, it's never the same. I mean, there's some hard things. You work eight or ten hours a day and you have to come cover up a City Board Meeting at night from 7:00 to 9:00 when it's back and forth, and back and forth. But, there was more good than bad. And, it can be a hard job. Some of us think the small newspapers are harder than the big ones.

Shane Watson: I would think so. And, are there any stories that stick out to you that you wrote or somebody else wrote for the *Lake County Banner*?

Evan Jones: Yeah, there's been some. It seems like more – there's been some great stories, and there's been some more tragedies, too, that I've covered. Yeah, there's some that stick out in my mind very much.

Shane Watson: If there's one story that you can remember that you could tell, what would it be?

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Evan Jones: I can tell – yeah, I can tell that one. But, we had a – I was big into sports. My first job was about I covered all sports. And, my best friend was the head football coach. And, we won state championship in 1985, which was a big deal in Lake County. And,

the smallest county in the state wins the state championship. But, anyway, he got into trouble with some inappropriate – it was a high school girl – under aged girl. And, there were some improprieties there. And, so I was covering the school board meeting, and the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* was covering the school board meeting. And, the people's relatives came in to this girl who had allegedly been abused or molested – came in. and, he just blew everything out of the water. So, I'm sitting here writing it down. And, I go home and I tell my dad. I say, "This is not going to be good." But, I wrote the story up. This was like at 10:00 at night. The Tuesday night, of course, the paper comes out on Wednesday morning.

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And, I'm home at 2:00 in the morning and the reporter from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* calls me up and says, "We're not going to go with this story." He says, "We've talked with our legal department." And, of course, The Banner's legal department is none. And, he said, "We've talked with the legal department and we're not going to run this." He says, "This is a career-ending story." So, I call my dad up at 3:00 in the morning and we edit it way down. I didn't use any names of any teachers or anything. But, it turned out the whole deal blew up and the coach, who was my best friend at the time, lost his job. And, it was a sad thing. But, I squirmed and grieved over that story about as much as anything. I was there from '75 to 2014. Now, that was the one because I was so closely involved and it broke my heart.

Shane Watson:

That had to be a very difficult situation for you. We're going to switch over to a little more – a little happier situation, I guess. If there's any youth that wanted to work for *Lake County Banner*, what advice would you have for them? Or, just wanted to work for a newspaper in general?

Evan Jones:

Oh, that's easy. Be fair and be accurate.

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See, it's simple to say, but sometimes harder to do. But, I always felt like when I ran the paper, I never had an agenda. I'm not out to get this person. Or, I'm probably a little too milk toast in that way. But, I just wanted to be fair and accurate.

Shane Watson:

Okay. And, I hear that *The Banner* has won many awards. Can you speak a little bit more on that?

Shane Watson: We have. We're very proud of our awards. We've won first place awards in editorials and best news story. I've won first place in best sports. Now, this is among the small weekly's. It's not among every paper. It's like high school football – it's got division. They've got small weekly's, large weekly's, small daily's. But, in our division, we've won I think 13 first place awards, and we're proud they've been across the board. I think I've won first place in sports four times. And, we've had best picture of the year. And, that's been very gratifying. We've probably won over 100 in second through sixth place.

Shane Watson: Okay. And, you said you worked until 2014.

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Evan Jones: Uh-huh.

Shane Watson: Was there a factor that made you decide not to work there anymore?

Evan Jones: Yeah, I was just getting older and burned out. I turned 63 yesterday. You might have seen my birthdate, and it was time to move on. And, the period that I ran The Banner, we went through hot type when they had the old presses you might see on T.V. where the shoot fed go back and forth, to a very rudimentary form of computers, to where we were totally paginated on max. My dad was always a little ahead of the game. We were one of the first small papers to have computers. Of course, now we're totally paginated on computers and things like that. And, the technology thing was catching up with me. It was getting harder and harder for me to keep up with you guys.

Shane Watson: I'm sure it was. And, happy belated birthday, by the way.

Evan Jones: Thank you.

Shane Watson: So, was it hard to give up the paper? And, is it still within the family? Or, is it out of the family now?

Evan Jones: No, it's sold to a man who owns about eight or nine similar size small weekly's. It's out of the family now. And, it was a difficult decision to make, but also one I'm at peace with.

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Shane Watson: Okay. So, I also hear that you're a historian of the Lake County area. Is that true?

Evan Jones: I'm very interested in local history – yes, I am.

Shane Watson: Is there any story of just local history that didn't make the newspaper that's very interesting to you?

Evan Jones: I mean, there's hundreds of them. But, I mean, we had – I've always been interested – we had the Night Riders in 1908. This vigilante group of – there was a large landowner here who was going to drain the lake and farm it. And, so there was a group of people around the lake that made their living off the lake, a kind of rough shot of people. And, they put together this vigilante group and ended up with some murders and things. And, the state – I think they called it the State Militia as opposed to the National Guard. But, they came here. That was a big deal at that time, and it had residual effects that lasted for decades here. Of course, I didn't report it, but I've read a lot about that.

Shane Watson: All right. And, were you here when the Emmitt Lewis Museum was put together?

Evan Jones: I was.

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And, I was on the fire department here for 38 years. And, I worked for – I was assistant chief. After he died, I became assistant chief. So, I was assistant chief for ten. So, I guess I worked with Emmitt about 28 years.

Shane Watson: Okay. Seeing that you grew up in Lake County and still reside here, are there certain factors that kept you here? Or, was it just your love for the county? Or, was it *The Lake County Banner*?

Evan Jones: All of the above. I worked in newspaper – I met a local girl. All my friends were here. I played sports until I got too old, pulled hamstrings, knees, ankles. That finally quit. But, yeah, I loved it here. I hunt and fish. I still hunt and fish every day that I can. And, I love to look at the river every evening. It's a great place.

Shane Watson: So, you say you hunt and fish. Did you do a lot of fishing as a child on Reel Lake?

Evan Jones: Some. My dad carried me when he could get time. Of course, he had four stair step kids, and that's where I got hooked, I guess, a bad worked to use. But, I got to love fishing. And, I've actually fished more since I go to be an adult than I did as a kid.

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Shane Watson: And, you say you've been here since – for a very long time. And, looking over your childhood up until this moment, would you say that Lake County has changed or has not changed?

Evan Jones: No, it's changed tremendously. It's gone from being – Lake County was totally, I guess agrarian is the word. It was all cotton fields and was all agriculture. And, we had a couple of small garment factories. And, of course, they went to Mexico and everywhere else. And, the farmers, before they had cotton pickers and everything, it'd take 150 people to farm x amount of acres – 2,000 acres. Now they can do it with three or four guys and this giant equipment. So, people started leaving and there wasn't anything for the kids to do. And, they just, both black and white, were gone. And, in 1980 our downtown – you probably walked down through there – every business was open. I mean, and we had clothes shops, and drug stores, and grocery stores, and shoe shops, and the picture show was open and all that. And, then people left.

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And, our little town has just kind of withered. The big change since I've been here is when they opened the state prison here around 1979 or 80. And, virtually every family in Lake County has somebody who works – either works at that prison or is kin to someone who works in that prison. It employs about maybe 1,000 people. Of course, Lake County doesn't have a workforce like that at all. But, everybody in Lake County either has immediate family who works there, or a friend or relative who works there.

Shane Watson: So, you're saying the changes have been people moving out, but also the prison providing jobs for the area after a lot of jobs moved away?

Evan Jones: That's true.

Shane Watson: Is there anything that you would like to see changed while you're here?

Evan Jones: Oh, yes. They've built a river port up here, and they're working every day to try to get an industry associated with it that would

bring 300 or 400 top paying jobs. That would be a Godsend for Lake County. And, there was a study released last year. Lake County was the 11th poorest county in the nation.

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You know, that was kind of sobering. But, yeah, we need some more jobs here.

Shane Watson: Okay. That would definitely help out a lot. If you could bring a tradition back from back in the day, what would it be?

Evan Jones: That's a tough one. One of our biggest traditions here that's still going strong is we have an arts and crafts festival every first weekend in October that draws about 40,000 people. And, which is a tremendous influx of people in this little county. And, that's been going on since like 1976. And, it's almost like a carnival locally. Everybody looks forward to it, and they have yard sales, and everybody in the county points to it for several months before it happens. That's just still an ongoing tradition that I like. I like our Christmas parades in the winter. And, that's always fun.

Shane Watson: So, would you say the Christmas parades are a big tradition in this area?

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Evan Jones: They are. Our football teams have been through some tough times, but football has been huge here for me many years. And, football Friday nights here are fun when the team's doing well and the whole county pulls together. And, their football Friday nights are something else.

Shane Watson: So, speaking of sports, you said you worked here 'till 2014. So, you were here when the basketball team won state.

Evan Jones: I was.

Shane Watson: How was that for the community?

Evan Jones: It was one of the most remarkable things that's ever happened here. And, the whole community – Lake County always pulls together for good or bad. But, they pulled together, and they had a huge parade, and they came back. It was a fun, fun time.

Shane Watson: Okay, and we're going to go to a little different side of things. I've heard this question can be difficult. It might be simple for you. If you could describe Lake County in one word, what would it be and why?

Evan Jones: One word. I think it would be, "cohesive."

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Shane Watson: That sounds about right. And, you've spoken about the lake, the Christmas parade, and the arts and crafts festival. And, as an organization, Crossroads to Freedom focuses on asset-based community development. Basically, meaning that we focus on the institutions, ideas, and organizations that bring value to the communities. In your opinion, what are some of the greatest assets to Lake County?

Evan Jones: I think first and foremost, it's just people. I think it's location. Sitting right here between the Mississippi River and Reel Foot Lake. And, we're geographically challenged. We're tucked up in the corner of the state, you know? And, you're not coming to Lake County unless you're coming for a specific reason. We don't get anyone to pass through. And, but I think those two things – the river and the lake are assets. And, we just have great people here.

Shane Watson: All right. It's been great hearing about you working for the newspaper, your family's history in the newspaper, all the assets of the community. And, I feel like we've spoken about a lot, but is there anything else that you would like to add before we end this interview?

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Evan Jones: No, I just thought you guys did a great job. I've enjoyed it.

Shane Watson: Thank you. We also want to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project, and we enjoyed learning about your story today.

Evan Jones: Thank you.

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