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Geraldine Downey, 2015

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Darneshia Harris: All right. Salutations and good morning. On behalf of the South Memphis Shalom Zone, Knowledge Quest, and Crossroads to Freedom and Rhodes College, I would like to thank you for taking the time to share your story. Today's date is June 17, 2015. My name is Darneshia Harris and I attend the **Salisbury** Charter School.

Stevion Young: And my name is Stevion Young and I go to Power Center Academy Middle school.

Darneshia Harris: Let's start out with some basic questions about you and your life. Then we will ask more specific questions about the neighborhood. So what is your name?

Geraldine Downey: My name is Geraldine S. Downey, and the S is for **Seawood**.

Darneshia Harris: Mm-hmm. And if you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Geraldine Downey: **1954** I was born.

Darneshia Harris: And where were you raised?

Geraldine Downey: Memphis, Tennessee.

Darneshia Harris: And what is your occupation?

Geraldine Downey: I landscape.

Darneshia Harris: And did you marry?

Geraldine Downey: Yes, I married.

Darneshia Harris: And what was your spouse's name and occupation?

Geraldine Downey: His name is Mr. William Downey, and he was a heavy equipment operator.

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Darneshia Harris: Did you have any children?

Geraldine Downey: I have one child. Her name is Tasha Downey, and she is in the educational field. She has three degrees, but she choose to be in educational and she have her law degree. She like working with children, and that's because I guess she was the only child, and she proud of that part but she work in education.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. And I asked you about your husband. Did you say he was?

Geraldine Downey: Yes. He don't do anything now, but he used to drive the bus for Knowledge Quest. And he worked for Mr. Foster up there. He drive the bus; he used to. And he just draws, you know sit at home wait for the mailman. But he don't, no. *[Laughs]* He don't work anymore. Nothing but just work for our pastor Milan Foster.

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Darneshia Harris: Okay. And you mentioned Knowledge Quest. What is that?

Geraldine Downey: That's – it's an evening program. It's – Mr. Foster is the ECO, and he work with the children, underprivileged children, a little bit. They not underprivileged but he helps them out a lot during the neighborhood. He have an evening program and that's what we call Knowledge Quest because he get the children from two o'clock to six o'clock. And they do their homework, they eat, and they go on trips sometimes. And that's what they do, and it is like a school.

Darneshia Harris: Oh that's nice. Okay. So can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Geraldine Downey: Where I grew up, where I live right now on **Wick** Street. I live at 615 Wicks.

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And when I was a kid I was living at 514 Wick Street. I'm 61 years old; that's how old I am. And I lived in the neighborhood for 56 of them years on the same two streets ever since I've been in Memphis, Tennessee. And it was to me like we have like kids. Like when I was growing up, it was the children they would all come around our house because my parents – well it was just my mom, single mom, and she always would help take care of the children. And they would always come to our house even when I was just a kid. But she would always it seemed like we had 20 children in our family but it was just the neighborhood children, because my mom always helped feed them and clothed them.

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And things was a little hard during that time, and we had a little extra so that's why my mom always fed and put clothes on children's back, made sure they were still going to school. We had a good time going to school just like you all doing right today, but we'd always be at our house 'cause we could count on, take it. And the next street when I got a little older, I lived on the next street. That's Hampton Street; that's the street over from Wick

Street. And I lived for just about most of my life. I lived in some apartments around there for like when I got to be 17 I thought I was all grown and everything. And mom lived right next door, and I lived in some apartments for like 15 years and then I moved back to Wick Street where I am now, been there for like 31 years. And we always know how to like the garden is coming up around Knowledge Quest.

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We always had a little garden for the peoples in the neighborhood, even before Knowledge Quest that we knew anything about Knowledge Quest 'cause I really didn't know about Knowledge Quest until Mr. Foster came around and walked the neighborhood, 'cause we wasn't churchgoers. But when I was small we weren't churchgoers, so after I grew up, Mr. Foster came walking the neighborhood like 11 years for me now and bro Mr. Downey. Everybody know him as bro Downey, so I'm just getting twisted. With bro Downey. And so when Mr. Foster walked the neighborhood and was asking everybody would they come to church, 'cause he was new too. He was new at his church. That's Chris Quest is right by Knowledge Quest. And he – so I decided that it was time for us to go to church.

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So bro Downey sent me up there. He was having revival that year, and I said, “Well I'm gonna go up there and see what this little young cat know.” So I went up there and he was out preaching and teaching under the tent. So I look and I sit, and I was just sitting there trying to just be quiet. And look then I say, “Well this coming Sunday I'm gonna go up there and see what he really know,” 'cause by me not being a churchgoer when I was a kid it was exciting to me. So Mr. Foster just grabbed us right on in right after that, and that's where we at now. We've been there like 11 years and we're really happy with Mr. Foster and Ms. Foster in our church family.

Darneshia Harris: Yeah. So what was your home life like? I mean you basically told me, but.

Geraldine Downey: Whole story.

[Laughter]

Darneshia Harris: Okay.

[Laughter]

Darneshia Harris: Okay. So what school did you attend to?

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Geraldine Downey: I went to Larose Elementary, and then I went to – well it's Porter Junior High. It was Porter Junior High, and then I graduated from BTW High School. And then I went to business school for like one year, a little business college. And it was good, doing the neighborhood. I'd just I'd sit on the porch right now watching the children go by, saying, "Well I can remember that time when I was going to BTW," 'cause I sit on the porch in the early morning so I can see the children going to BTW. And it was same; it was pretty good. It was nice.

Darneshia Harris: So you said you went to business school?

Geraldine Downey: Mm-hmm.

Darneshia Harris: And why'd you go?

Geraldine Downey: It's a business college, and I forgot the name of it.

[Laughter]

Geraldine Downey: It's so long ago I forgot the name of it.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. Did you like it?

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Geraldine Downey: Yes, ma'am.

Darneshia Harris: Did you finish? Like did you graduate?

Geraldine Downey: No. I just went like four months, five months. No, I didn't finish.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. Has it helped you in any way?

Geraldine Downey: Yeah, it helped me a whole lot. It helped me because of the little business that I run. Like landscaping, I'm self-employed, that's me. And I know how to handle business pretty good with my people. It teaches you to work with people, you know all colors, all kinds, you know rich, poor, just all kind. And it teaches you, so that's what I got out of it. And then see the business that we came about with my mama. Again, see it's always the mama. It's sad but –

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And she taught us to learn, I mean to feed ourselves and work. So then when I went to Business College, then I used to go to work with them every day, every day until I sit, look, and listen, and I learned how to do it myself. And then by going to that business school, that helped me to work with people at all costs, you know and all kind, just everything.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. And so you brought up your mom. Like was your father in the picture at all?

Geraldine Downey: Well I can – *[laughs]*. No, my father wasn't in the picture. My mom was a strong lady and it was like it was five girls, no young men. And that's another thing. When it's all girls, it's kind of hard. But see my mama was a strong black lady and she taught us to do things that young men do you know, so we could feed ourselves if we had a husband, if we didn't have a husband.

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But she just – no, my daddy wasn't in the picture, because he was in Mississippi and then we was in Memphis, Tennessee, and he was a farmland man. And that was that for me. When I was three, I was in Memphis, Tennessee. And then so it was just my mom and then my older sister, and that was it. And she taught us how to work, be good to people at all times. That help you out a whole lot no matter what. Just be good, you know be yourself, no more, no less.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. And being good to people like has it helped you go a long way with your business in life?

Geraldine Downey: Yes it has, yes it has. And peoples always if I do one job, they pass my number on. Then I'm getting like ten or 12 more other peoples just –

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because they like my spirit and they like the way I handle things. And yeah, it helps you a whole lot when you be good to people. No matter what, just be good. However they treat you, still be good.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. And you brought up your business. What's the name of your business?

Geraldine Downey: Complete Landscaping.

Darneshia Harris: Okay. So did you attend church?

Geraldine Downey: Do I attend church? Every Sunday. I told you Mr. Marlin T. Foster that's our pastor, and he's a great man and he do a lot. And then one thing I left out. I learned a lot from Mr. Foster. I learned new peoples working with Mr. Foster, like in the Shalom Zone. Ms. Amy, I work for Ms. Amy a lot. And it just teaches you to when you meet one person, but see that's go back to being good.

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Good attitude. That helps a whole lot. And then see you grow. You learn more people. You learn how to do more things when you work with people.

Darneshia Harris: Okay.

Stevion Young: We're gonna ask you – let's talk a little bit about how life in South Memphis used to be.

Geraldine Downey: Oh yes.

Stevion Young: Exactly. Can you share some childhood experiences that you had in South Memphis?

Geraldine Downey: Mm-hmm.

Stevion Young: Any specific memories that you had while there?

Geraldine Downey: Oh yes. Childhood. When I was, like I said, I only lived on like three streets. So we – like on Mississippi, I know everybody should know about Mississippi and Walker. It used to be a theater up there. We had everything that we needed. It was a large hamburger place, big text.

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And it was drug stores, and I was intending to bring you all some pictures but I'm kind of slow sometime in the morning time. So that you could see that it was some houses around the neighborhood and it was theaters. Just you didn't have to go – you could live in South Memphis; everything was in South Memphis. And when I was a kid we would always come to Mississippi and Walker 'cause everything was there. The food place, the theaters, and we always – some little streets back there we always stopped and played before we got to the theater. And then we were down to college and **McLamore** where it's **Saulsville**. Plenty of things was down there. We'd always go down there, ride our bike down there, and we'd always see like the musicians going in.

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Sam Madave and just about all of them. Motown. We was Motown during that time. When I was a kid we was Motown instead of Saulsville. So we had good times up around Mississippi and College and McLamore. And we always just went to church. We played in the church sometime *[laughs]* when I was a kid now. I learned better as I got to be a little older, mm-hmm. And there was houses just about on every block little block that you see, plenty of houses. Like now you don't see but one house here, one house there. Like where I live on Wicks it's just only two houses and one across the street. But the whole block was filled with houses, and then everything started just – as our parents got older, everything started to just being torn down and grass fields.

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But see would always be outside like in the evening time, 'cause it was just – we would go to just any house and just play, 'cause there was plenty during the time that I was little, when I was small.

Stevion Young:

Because of those experiences that gave you a outlook on South Memphis, what did those experiences lead you to believe about South Memphis? What does South Memphis mean to you exactly?

Geraldine Downey:

Those experience that they mean everything to me because I've been there for 55, 56 years, know everybody. And then now I learn to work with the kids your age, smaller. That's again coming through Knowledge Quest.

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Working with Ms. Amy, same, and teaching us to be together and stay together and also kind of work with our young kids today, because they are trying to straggle their way. And that's why it's good that there's Knowledge Quest and Shalom Zone, 'cause if not, it would be much worsen than it is now. That's what I believe. Now it might not be true, but that's what I believe. And I think that both of those put together are doing very good, 'cause kids would've been just – see like see we could go anywhere when I was a kid. When I was 12, 13 years old, we could go anywhere, do anything. That's coming from having a single parent. And see now you all have like places to go.

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Gym, read, all that. So it kind of helps a whole lot, because see we didn't have all the things that you all have like Knowledge Quest

and Saulsville; we didn't have it. And see we were great baseball players and all that. See now like if we wanted to play – you all like to baseball. You all have all that right now, still can be in the league. See we didn't have none of that to back us up. See you all got plenty of things to back you up so that you stay busy and learn to work with peoples and children. That's what we do now. That's what I do now. I work with a lot of kids.

Stevion Young: So you believe that because of the places like the Knowledge Quest and the programs like the South Memphis Shalom Zone, –

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you believe that it's making South Memphis a better place to live and it's making it a more safer and better environment for people?

Geraldine Downey: I really believe it's making it safer, and it's – I am this I'd say tip of the _____. Yes, I think it's a very good program and it's making a difference in South Memphis. It's teaching our children how to you know even grow gardens and cook, and see we didn't have nothing like that. But we just knew 'cause our parents was farmers and had to do kind of stuff like that to feed the children, 'cause it was still the same. It was like mostly single parents, the mama. So yeah, I think it's making a whole lot different.

Stevion Young: Let's talk a little bit about how South Memphis was like in the '60s and '70s.

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What was exactly going on around South Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Geraldine Downey: In the '60s and the '70s what was going on, some of the kids was going to school. Some of them wanted to be like just be out in the streets and hang out and be cool, like it was a Harlem house up on Mississippi, again up on the Mississippi and Walker. So the children have to wanna go to school, 'cause if not, you know it's always something that's gonna distract them. Like they was I'll say all the cool kids they would stand up in the Harlem house and parents always gonna make some kind of way to get them a dollar or 50 cents so that they can have something to eat going to school.

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But they choose to go up in the Harlem house or stand on the corner in the '60s and '70s, like stand on the corner and show their nice clothes off. And you know supposed to be in school

somewhat but you're standing on the corner. And the young ladies, you know all the cuties, they was being distracted by being something else you know. Some little young fellow come along and tell them they cute and there goes something else you know. It's something else would be going on. *[Laughs]* So we would just like to stand out and be – and we was never – and like today, see all this robbery and all that, that wasn't going on now. They would just stand and be nice and like to be you know school time, 'cause we still looked like we was kind of grown, but I was always staying at school. I knew what to do 'cause you have to go to school.

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But if you choose standing on the corner, see you lost, so don't choose to stand on the corner. And that's what they did in the '60s and the '70s. And like they would hang around like Saulsville. It wasn't Saulsville; it was Motown all up there. So they would like to stand out there and, like I say, look at the musicians coming in and everything like that. So yeah. And it just wasn't no all that killing and robbing and nothing like that. It's you go to school if you wanted during that 60 and 70 time, so that's why again Knowledge Quest and Shalom is making a very big difference in South Memphis.

Stevion Young:

So besides all the people from that you had experiences with when you were growing up, –

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like your friends and stuff, about random people, how are they different than the random people are now? Were they nicer, or?

Geraldine Downey:

Yes. We would always stay together, play together, and we would always you know being in a little hub like the kids do today. And they was very nice because our parents, although we just still had our mom, she still would give us rules and regulations, you know stay in the house or you can stand right here in front of their house 'cause it was, like I said, plenty of houses. And we learned to be good to each other. We didn't fight. And if we did, you know we just wrestled real quick and then that fight be over 'cause somebody gonna get whooped by somebody's parents, you know my parents or their parents. So we would do stuff like that.

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But that's how it was when you growing up into being a young man or a young lady see.

Stevion Young: So because of all the differences between the people in South Memphis, what do you think that South Memphis' reputation is now, and how has it changed exactly from back then?

Geraldine Downey: It's changed because one of the things is we don't have all the houses. We really don't have a lot of kids in South Memphis unless it's you know in kind of near the project and stuff. But see I didn't grow up in the project. I just grew up living in three streets, like I said, so we didn't see very many children. And that's how it changed, because now our kids are doing –

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like they you know going to school getting an education so they don't hang out too much like they used to do when I was growing up. And it makes a change.

Stevion Young: So what would you say? Would you say South Memphis is now known as a better, a good place to live because of all the differences between the way children behave now and other people behave?

Geraldine Downey: During my time it was a real nice place to grow up, and it's still a nice place to grow up. It'd be people that don't live in South Memphis come around against South Memphis or I mean a different name and everything, but it's always been a nice place to live. And it's so different now because our kids are learning much more than we learned when we was growing up. So yeah, it's still a nice place to live.

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Stevion Young: I heard you say something about the people who don't live in South Memphis and give South Memphis a bad name. What exactly do you mean by that?

Geraldine Downey: I didn't hear you.

Stevion Young: I remember you talking, saying something about how people who don't live in South Memphis come in and give it a bad name by coming in and bringing all different types of bad things in. Do you have any like examples that you could give us?

Geraldine Downey: Yeah, because every time you see – I'll give you a short one, like for instance. Once last summer when – I hang out around Knowledge Quest kind of a lot, so I was up there. I saw a little dude that didn't live there. He was trying to run up in Knowledge Quest and it was like three cars of police men behind him.

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He was trying to hide his drugs or whatever he had when he was running across the lots. See and Mr. Downey he knew to stand out on the lot so to keep you know the older people from coming through the lot, 'cause it's kid zone really up there but they like to come through, cut through. And then like something happen they really like to come through. Like some of the employees and maybe they hid their little drugs and stuff; that's what they did at one time. And then on the street where I live, same. They come down the street, police behind them about the lots not being cut around there. There's a lot of empty lots now, so they will throw drugs over in the lot. Police you have to wrestle them down, run them down, and they don't even live around there.

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But other than that, South Memphis is quiet and it's a peaceful place to live right now.

Stevion Young:

Besides the Knowledge Quest and the churches around here, so like what are some places, like buildings and businesses, that help make South Memphis a better place?

Geraldine Downey:

Hmm. Steepleton, that's over by – it's on Lauderdale. It's a tire company and they kind of donate. They help you know kind of get locks cut 'cause there's plenty empty lots. And who else? And just mostly the churches. Well mostly Mr. Foster's church because the other churches they ain't too much – there's a few pitching in trying to –

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get the neighborhood some houses and keep the grass cut around all them empty fields. And that's about the only somebody.

Stevion Young:

In your opinion, what do you think is the best thing going for South Memphis? What is the best thing in South Memphis, about South Memphis?

Geraldine Downey:

It's Knowledge Quest, and I keep saying Knowledge Quest 'cause that's all we got. *[Laughs]* And that's all we got. It is Knowledge Quest 'cause Knowledge Quest is making a very big difference around there. Mr. Foster, it ain't just Knowledge Quest, it's Mr. Foster too now. *[Laughs]* And he's making a very big difference around there. In that little five-block area he's making a difference. And that's all I can really think of besides *[laughs]* –

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[Inaudible]. And then we got a clothes closet that still come from Mr. Foster, but we have another clothes closet up on McLamore, and that's with White Stone Church. But all the churches would bring in the clothes – no, people donate us clothes and we supposed to take them to the center up there. And Mr. Foster he would keep a full closet. We got a full closet at the church. And then Christ Quest is different from Knowledge Quest, but it's still all Mr. Foster. And he really don't want all the credit, but it just it is what it is. And that's all it is around there, it's Mr. Foster.

Stevion Young: I heard you say something about some clothes closets around in South Memphis.

Geraldine Downey: Yes.

Stevion Young: Could you give us a description of how the system works with you bringing in clothes and how many people on average you guys help?

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Geraldine Downey: Yes. We have the one up on McLamore. It's you go up there like on Mondays and Fridays. And if you just volunteer for just 20 minutes, you pick out your outfit and you can stay up there and you can pick out clothes for your children. And you don't really have to do no work. They just want you to show up, sign your name, and kind of hang around for a few minutes. So they're trying to teach the adults to kind of do something in the neighborhood. And also like in the garden if you work three hours, two hours, something like that, you can get a little food on Friday. Mr. Foster pass out you know tomatoes, okra and things like that.

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And the clothes closet at our church they don't have to do nothing but just come and say that they need some clothes for them and their children, and it's always some clothes there. So they can have some if they just need them. And they don't have to need them. They just come and say they want them. And that's what we do.

Stevion Young: Have you ever lived in any other place besides South Memphis, or has this just been your home for your whole life?

Geraldine Downey: South Memphis has just been my – my parents, well my mom – yeah, that's the only place I lived is South Memphis. And we always know like the five girls, and the children.

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It was more than – you know there was plenty of kids around, so it was just like a whole little town, the little three streets that I lived on. And so we always called that part of the town South Memphis, but we know it was bigger than that, but it's just South Memphis, them little three streets.

Stevion Young: During your time in South Memphis, have you ever experienced any segregation or racial situations or segregation in your educational experiences?

Geraldine Downey: When I was growing up, 12, ten, it was kind of segregated. And we always had – like I say, we was always people person, so we didn't have that trouble. Like when they was marching, my mom –

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she always knew to tell us to stay on our little three streets. You know don't go look for stuff. You stay where your parents tell you. And then we always had – and when I was seven years old, let me tell you when I was seven years old, we used to go to the candy store and that was on Third and Walker in a little street called **Barden**. So we would go to the store and it was a little stool. We had to stand on the stool and put our money through the window, and the white kids they could sit inside the building. But there was a little window and we would always – and I wondered about that when I was growing up, 'cause see we never made a difference between the white and the black 'cause we always know to stay where we supposed to stay and stay out of other folks' business.

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And we would go to that candy store. We had a little stool. I was running with the stool before when I was seven. And we had to put our little money in a little glass thing. And we stand up and we look over there and say, "Well I want that piece of peppermint candy right there," 'cause we didn't know we weren't supposed to go inside the store 'cause we was black kids. And then we always had our lawyer, he was a little white man, and he always liked my mama 'cause my mama could kind of cook kind of good. And he would come to our house on Sunday, and I used to be saying, "Now what is this man down here for?" And he would come down there and he would tell my mama to cook him some cornbread

'cause she could cook real good. And he would sit there at our house at 514 Wicks, that's when I was a kid and I lived up the street now. And he would say –

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He would tell, "Willy, cook me two skilletts of that cornbread," and she would cook two skillet. He would sit there and he would eat like one whole cornbread and then he would take the other one home to him and his wife. And I used to ask mother, I said, "Mother, why that man come down here and see." Like I said, we was always a people person; we know nothing about that. But that's how it was. It was right. We were supposed to be like that, but we was always peoples, so it didn't make a difference to us.

Stevion Young: So because of those experiences, how do you think race relations have changed from then and now?

Geraldine Downey: It changed – it has not changed really because it really –

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It's because of – I'm gonna tell you. I think when there was like Martin Luther King said, "One day you will see little black children and little white children holding hands," see we didn't know nothing about that. We just knew that it wasn't gonna be like that because we always stay with our little black children and the other little white children stay with them, so I could never figure that out when I was a kid. But then as I grew older and then I started seeing you know little black and whites going together. But like I said, never crossed my mind that it was a difference, because we always knew about people, and that's how it was. And you know as we being black, we don't kind of do like we feel.

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You know if that's what we want, that's what we gonna do.

Stevion Young: So we appreciate all the information you've shared with us this morning. And as we conclude this interview, is there any advice you would like to leave with the younger generation of South Memphis?

Geraldine Downey: Always I like for our kids to continue to go to Saulsville and Knowledge Quest and again. And you got to further your education. And it don't make a difference about you know the black and the whites. You just gotta do what you supposed to do, 'cause most people when I was growing up they'd be saying, "Well

you know they doing this because all the white kids gonna have the jobs." But if you don't go – you got to go to school, and if you don't go to school you can't be crying about all the whites kid got the job and all the –

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learning how to speak Spanish and stuff. You have to just keep going to school and still learning fresh. You gotta learn Spanish you know *[laughs]*, and that's just how it is. It's the education that's really making the difference, so it's as we get that into our head and our mind we gonna be just fine. And I always think that. And like I said, education is the key and we got plenty help right today; we have plenty. Like Salon and they trying to get us some houses and all this stuff down in there so we can have our you know keep going to school and learning to do things. And that's it.

Stevion Young: Is there anything you would like to add on that we haven't covered?

Geraldine Downey: No, young man. You have covered plenty.

Stevion Young: Thank you. Thank you for part –

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