Eddye Pickett, 2013

[0:00:00]

Cameron Jones: Oh behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and Knowledge Quest I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Cameron Jones…

Courtney Campbell: And I'm Courtney Campbell.

Cameron Jones: And I am honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record? What is your name?

Eddye Pickett: My name is Eddye J. Pickett.

Cameron Jones: If you don't mind me asking you, what year were you born?

Eddye Pickett: 1944.

Cameron Jones: Where were you born and raised?

Eddye Pickett: I was born in West Memphis, Arkansas. I was raised in Memphis, Tennessee.

Cameron Jones: What is your occupation?

Eddye Pickett: I'm retired but I was a union secretary for Mentalist University for 43 years.

Cameron Jones: What did that job all involve while you were there?

Eddye Pickett: Well I greeted people.

[0:01:00]

I sit at the desk. I greeted visitors, answer patient call light, check doctors' orders and whatever else I was needed to do.

Cameron Jones: Did you feel like you had an important job in your field?

Eddye Pickett: Yes.

Cameron Jones: Are you or were you married?

Eddye Pickett: I were. I'm a widow.

Cameron Jones: What was your spouse's occupation?

Eddye Pickett: He worked for the city of Memphis, sanitation worker.

Cameron Jones: What was his name?

Eddye Pickett: John Henry.

Cameron Jones: How did your husband job affect your life?

Eddye Pickett: *[Laughs]* Can I come back to that?

Cameron Jones: Mm-hmm, yes. Do you or did you have any children?

Eddye Pickett: Yes, I have three.

Cameron Jones: Can you tell me what they were like?

Eddye Pickett: I have two girls and one boy. The oldest – all of them got different personality.

[0:02:00]

The oldest girl is very quiet and she excelled in school. She was I think fifth in her class. She was a majorette at BTW and she is now a microbiologist at the Soleil Company. My second child was quiet. She was salutatorian of her class at BTW and she now works at BTW as a secretary, Booker T. Washington High School as a sec – and my son, he was rowdy as a little boy but he had diabetes at 12 years old so that kind of slowed him down. He is now disabled.

[0:03:00]

He is a kidney transplant patient.

Cameron Jones: How has your son affected your life by him having diabetes?

Eddye Pickett: Well at first it was kind of nervous, nerve-wracking and took up a lot of time because in the later years he got to be a brillo diabetic and he had to go to the hospital a lot but we made it through. He had his kidney fail and he had his kidney transplant. He's doing well now.

Cameron Jones: Now let's talk a little bit about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Eddye Pickett: Okay. I grew up in a neighborhood right off of E.H. Crump. The name of the street was California.

[0:04:00]

We was real close-knitted and it was a church *[coughs]* – excuse me. It was a church call Greater Mount Pleasant and that's when we wasn't out in the neighborhoods spent most of our time. On a Wednesday night everything was done for the youth. We had Girl Scouts. We got together at – the pastor even rented a factory to give us dance in. It was just a close-knitted neighborhood. I went to Carver. Most of my neighbors went to BTW but in walking home from school I know you all may have heard but on every corner you had a mother.

[0:05:00]

So you did not do anything wrong because you knew that that mother was going to recommend you and then when you got home you would get another recommendation – I mean recommend. It's something they have taken out now. It was corporal punishment. But I had a good childhood.

Cameron Jones: What was your home life like?

Eddye Pickett: What? Coming up or now?

Cameron Jones: Coming up like how your – how was your home (muffled)?

Eddye Pickett: Well I'm the only child. I had my mother and father. I lived with my mother and father and sometime my auntie because my mother worked. My father was more lenient to me. My mother, you would knew I was the only child because my mother didn't treat me like an only child.

[0:06:00]

If I didn't need it I didn't get it but I kind of had Daddy wrap around my finger. My auntie and cousin also was real lenient with me.

Cameron Jones: Did you ever get bored being the only child in your household?

Eddye Pickett: Not when I was small but now I do. But when I was small it was great because other than my mother I could go to my auntie,

Daddy and get most of the thing I want. But since I grown up and where it really – I start feeling kind of alone in high school because once I went into the house there was no one to talk to other than my parents and it was kind of a lonely feeling. But it wasn't really bad.

[0:07:00]

Cameron Jones: Where did you go to elementary school?

Eddye Pickett: I went to Cansee Elementary.

Cameron Jones: Did you have fun there?

Eddye Pickett: Yes. Now the first grade I can remember I went to a private school called Roperburn Cooperative. I don't think it's up now but even now I can remember that experience. I hated it. But from second through the sixth grade I had a lot of fun. You can notice my name is E-D-D-Y-E because it's Eddye and I used to cry when someone called me Eddy because children used to tease me about it. In the third grade my teacher had me to change the I to a Y and this is how I started accepting my name as Eddye.

[0:08:00]

Cameron Jones: Where did you go to middle school or high school?

Eddye Pickett: It was junior high at the time and it was Porter, where Porter Junior High on Lauderdale. I went to high school at the Carver High School.

Cameron Jones: Can you describe your experiences at Carver?

Eddye Pickett: It was a good school. I was in the band for three years. I wasn't there for my senior year. I work in the office and it was really a pretty good experience. Carver, when I went there was a new school. They had just built it and I moved from Porter to Carver with the principal. His name was R.B. Thompson. So it's kind of like I growed up from the 7th grade through the 12th grade with the same educator.

[0:09:00]

Cameron Jones: Would you say the band had an impact on your life?

Eddye Pickett: The band?

Cameron Jones: Yeah.

Eddye Pickett: Yes. It made me more organized and I think it helped discipline, too.

Cameron Jones: How did segregation impact your educational experiences?

Eddye Pickett: Until the Civil Right Movement I really didn't know that much about the – even though we went like – I can remember on Mondays I believe it was you only went in to go smell. I mean you went to go smell but you couldn't go upstairs. You went downstairs. It was a barking day. I forget what the color wins. No, it was Wednesday and it was called Clover Wednesday but you could not go upstairs.

[0:10:00]

You had to go down in the basement to buy. There's another department store they called Gerbert. Black people could not go in it at all and I used to ask my mother why we could not go in there. I remember one time I was standing waiting on the bus and this sales lady came out and this lady was looking in the window. She actually talked very harsh to this – I can't use the words that she used to the lady. But like I said it didn't really affect me because I just accepted there was certain places you could go and you couldn't go until the Civil Right Movement. During the Civil Right Movement I was very acted in that with Reverend Lawson and Reverend Kyles.

[0:11:00]

Cameron Jones: Which churches have you attended?

Eddye Pickett: What?

Cameron Jones: What church or churches have you attended?

Eddye Pickett: Okay, like I said I growed up in a church called Greater White – I mean, I'm sorry. I growed up in a church called Greater – oh, I'm sorry. Greater Mount Pleasant. After I left there I joined at Greater White Stone and I have been there for 26 years.

Cameron Jones: Can you describe these church?

Eddye Pickett: Well I said at first with the church that I grow up I don't know if you all have heard this or some called the little church by the railroad track. That remind me of the church I grow up in because it was a little, small church and it was by a railroad track. Like I said earlier that we did everything in that church. We had a pool that we did baptism in, we swam in and everybody knew everybody at church.

[0:12:00]

The church that I am with now is Greater White Stone. The deceased minister is Reverend Joseph McGee who was an educator and very – he pushed young people to be what they could be. The pastor now is Reverend Roger Brown and he also is – well he work at LaMar and he pushes the young people to do whatever that they can. Like the church I'm in now we have a community festival every year. What his vision is is to revitalize the South Memphis area.

[0:13:00]

On the inside right behind the Rhode's school and we had this community festival and everything is free to the community. We have food, games, entertainment and that is way to let the community know that the church is there for them.

Cameron Jones: What kind of activities were you involved coming up?

Eddye Pickett: I said the band. Girl Scout. In the church I sang in the junior choir. I can't think of any – but I was very active. I just can't think right now.

Cameron Jones: Can you share some of the memories from your childhood that influenced you later on in your life?

[0:14:00]

Eddye Pickett: Okay, well one of the memories like I say was the corporal punishment and everyone – it always upset me when they say corporal punishment affects a child negatively because now – and I don't mind telling I will be 69 years old in a few weeks and sometimes now I can think of some of the whippings that I have gotten and still feel them. I think that that led me in the right way. It made me respectful of authority and elderly people and it just help. My other childhood memories I can remember is the

Christmas Parade. I used to always look forward to going down on Main Street for the Christmas Parade.

[0:15:00]

Courtney Campbell: Ms. Pickett, let's talk a little bit about the sanitation strikes in Memphis. Can you tell us about your husband's involvement in the sanitation strike?

Eddye Pickett: Yes. Like I say, he worked for the sanitation and during – I forgot the length of time but during that time it was like I think two week and he didn't get any pay at all. Of course that affected the household because at that time I was not working. We'd march during the sanitation strike and the first person that went to jail it was a store that we called the Five and Dime Store name Woodward. The police came in.

[0:16:00]

I was on the end counter and the police came in and just start hitting people with they baton. The person there was Reverend _____ and I went back to them at that time and told them that I was with them. Anything I could do but they needed somebody on the outside to pray. So I would not be in another sit-in demonstration. But during the sanitation – I was home the day that they bombed but they did bomb my _____ cathedral. My husband was in the wave of the bomb. They threw – what's the name of that?

Courtney Campbell: Tear gas?

Eddye Pickett: Yeah, thank you. Tear gas into the church and he was affected by the tear gas.

[0:17:00]

But the hospital was so full that he could not get treated. So his mother did home remedies and he was okay. The reason of the sanitation strike was that they did not treat them humanly. They had to work in the rain. There was no shelter for them. They only got paid a few pennies and they – or the trucks that they work on were not very durable neither. So that was the reason and why Dr. Martin Luther King came.

Courtney Campbell: Were supportive and were most people supportive when they wanted to strike?

Eddye Pickett: Yes. The South Memphis community especially was supportive.

Courtney Campbell: How did your husband not being paid affect your household?

[0:18:00]

Eddye Pickett: Well it affected it pretty badly but luckily we had his mother and other friends. They help us with food and everything, rent. I didn't have a house at that time but rent and everything wasn't affected before they got some help. But luckily we had friends and his mother, parents, help us.

Courtney Campbell: What was the extent of your involvement?

Eddye Pickett: What the extent of my involvement?

Courtney Campbell: Mm-hmm.

Eddye Pickett: Well like I said I was marching until the policemen start hitting. My support mostly was telephone calls, passing out flyers and et cetera.

[0:19:00]

Well telephone calls and passing out flyers.

Courtney Campbell: Were you ever violently attacked?

Eddye Pickett: No, thank God.

Courtney Campbell: You mentioned Reverend Lawson and Reverend Kyles earlier.

Eddye Pickett: Uh-huh.

Courtney Campbell: Did you have any encounters with them, any contact?

Eddye Pickett: Well just at the meetings, not personally contact but at meetings when we went to the meetings and things. We met several times at _____ where Reverend Lawson at that time was pastor there. But I had no personal contact with him.

Courtney Campbell: What do you remember of Martin Luther King's time in Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: Well my rememory is his Mountaintop speech when he went – I was over there at Mason Temple and the speech was so moving

that everyone in the place I think got chills especially when he said he may not get there with us but he was prepared to die.

[0:20:00]

It was like a chill that came over the place. There was my most – of course the day that he died it was like the world had just stopped to me.

Courtney Campbell: Do you remember what happened when the news broke out?

Eddye Pickett: What? Which – oh you're talking about the riots?

Courtney Campbell: Were you _____? Mm-hmm.

Eddye Pickett: Yes. The first one that I can remember is they went – it was bad because the riots was in our neighborhood, in the South Memphis neighborhood. The first one I can remember is when they – I think it was my other church that they went to and broke out one sit thing but it was our neighborhood that really got destructed.

[0:21:00]

During the riot everyone had to stay in the house. At that time I was working. I was working 3:00 to 11:00 and I was living right down the street there on Hampton Place, the _____ – not _____ marchers but the armed guards. They used to come right down the street and had the guns pointed out. They wonder I guess if someone would say something they would have shot them. But it was a scary event just with them riding down the street. Of course most of them was of the other race.

Courtney Campbell: Were you afraid? Did you fear for your family's safety?

Eddye Pickett: I was afraid but not for, like I say, that we was taught to recognize authority. I believed that they would shoot and it just seemed – I'm afraid to guns now.

[0:22:00]

So just seeing those rifles sticking out the window made me afraid but other than that I didn't feel any fear for my safety. I'd go in the house and go to sleep but I was riding the bus at the time and I got off of work at 11:00. I just wanted my husband would meet me at the bus stop and walk me home. I'd feel that someone might – the police must also might stop him because I think curfew was

like 11:00 and tried to stop but didn't anything happen. That's the only fear that I actually had.

Courtney Campbell: Do you think that South Memphis as a whole was a better community after the strike?

Eddye Pickett: After the strike?

Courtney Campbell: Mm-hmm.

Eddye Pickett: No. That's when I think it started deteriorating because to me we have hurt our self with desegregation because everything is moving away from your surrounding.

[0:23:00]

Like for instance, like the school everyone is going where the houses. Everyone is going out east or going to Collierville. That started deteriorating the neighborhood then. The neighborhood fell apart. After the strike of course it was desegregation that happened. Like I say, it was a good thing but it hurt us more than I think it helped.

Courtney Campbell: So how would you describe South Memphis before integration?

Eddye Pickett: Well we were just a close-knitted neighborhood and the area of South Memphis is pretty right stretch but still everybody just about knew everybody.

[0:24:00]

It was some disturbance but it wasn't a lot of disturbance before the riot. You went to school, came home, went to work, went to church and you didn't have to worry about being robbed. In fact you slept on your porch because there wasn't any air conditioning back when – very few air condition back in the '50s and the '60s and you could sleep on your own porch without being bothered. You left home and if you had someone who didn't have a key you left your door open so they could get in the house and you didn't have to worry about anyone coming in. That was Memphis, Tennessee at that time, not only South Memphis but the whole community.

[0:25:00]

Courtney Campbell: South Memphis in relation to Memphis do you think is the core of this city? Do you think that South Memphis and Memphis are the same place as in where…

Eddye Pickett: No, not at all especially South Memphis because like I said earlier everyone is moving away from South Memphis and it just a few – once the older people all die out the children or young people they usually sell the house or leave the house. That's why there's so many blighted houses. They just deteriorate and they tear them down. That's what we are trying to do is just revitalize South Memphis to let them know that there is something to offer here in South Memphis.

Courtney Campbell: Do you think the people here in South Memphis are any different than the people there when you were younger?

[0:26:00]

Eddye Pickett: Yes and I want to say South Memphis is Memphis that I mean the people are younger because like I say, we was taught to respect authority, to respect the elderly and anyone that is over you. Now it seem like a lot of people don't respect authority at all and like young boys they walk every night – not only young boys, girls, too walk up and down the street, use profanity and elderly people be sitting on the porch or if I just say myself, if I say something to someone they may use profanity and use words like, "Mind your own business old lady." We would have never done that when I was coming up.

[0:27:00]

Courtney Campbell: What do you think it is in South Memphis that keeps it together there?

Eddye Pickett: The elderly people that are still here and some of the younger people is really interesting in revitalizing the community but I think it's things like Booker T. Washington High School, my church Greater White Stone and the pastors they just get together and knit the community together to make it what it is. Now some businesses also plays a large part in the community.

Courtney Campbell: What do you think would make South Memphis a better place?

Eddye Pickett: To rebuild the houses and apartment, make houses more affordable so people can keep them.

[0:28:00]

I must say like College Park here is a beautiful place. They have really designed it good but they have put the price on the houses so high that a lot of the people cannot afford the houses. If you walk through College Park which I did about three months ago and it's a lot of fuss for sale on the houses. They have gotten foreclosure. So if they make the houses affordable and build more houses I think it will be – that we can revitalize. Oh yeah, let me mention Metro. It need to be built up. We need a theater in South Memphis. We need a grocery store and just some place for young people to go and they could do that with the Metro Shopping Center.

[0:29:00]

Courtney Campbell: What do you think their new businesses and places for young people to go what do you think that would do for the community?

Eddye Pickett: I think it would build it back up and with the right people running it the one that had went astray I think you could bring them back together.

Courtney Campbell: You think more people would have pride in South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: Yeah, I do if we…

Courtney Campbell: Do you have pride in South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: Hmm?

Courtney Campbell: Do you have pride in South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: Do I have what?

Courtney Campbell: Pride. Are you proud of South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: Oh yes, uh-huh. That's why I'm still here.

Courtney Campbell: What do you love about South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: The convenience, well used to be the convenience when you could go – and I still say that it my car don't crank and I need to go to a doctor I can walk. If I needed to go to a grocery store I could walk.

[0:30:00]

But it's more convenience than being out east and you go to the doctor and the hospitals without – I mean worrying about having transportation.

Courtney Campbell: So you think South Memphis has everything you need but not necessarily everything you want?

Eddye Pickett: Nope, it don't have it because we need a grocery store. We don't have a grocery store. It don't bother me but with the elderly who don't drive and now Ease Away have clothes that that's the store that they used to use downtown Memphis. It have clothes. If they don't have transportation it's really hard for them to get to a grocery store. The elderly and the young people they use a lot of these corner stores –

[0:31:00]

which the merchandise is twice as high as it is in the grocery store and then they don't have anything like vegetables and meats to get. That's what it actually need is a grocery store.

Courtney Campbell: Well with College Park and new revitalization you're hopeful about the future of South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: Yes.

Courtney Campbell: Why?

Eddye Pickett: Well I just think, well number one, Memphis don't have anywhere else to go. They got to come down instead of go up. They have one out, it's for west, the Memphis and Arkansas Bridge stop and they have one for east that they could go and this far north. So here, this the only place they got to go. I do believe they're going to revitalize it but I only hope that they will make it where people can afford it.

[0:32:00]

Courtney Campbell: How do you think South Memphis will look in 20 or 30 years?

Eddye Pickett: Probably have a lot of senior houses and more businesses and probably more I hate to say educated but that's the only way I can think, people with high income. Probably a high income area in the next 20 years or so.

Courtney Campbell: Is there any advice you would like to give to young South Memphis?

Eddye Pickett: The only thing I can say is if you have a house or your parents or grandparents have a house just try to stay here in South Memphis and help build it up.

[0:33:00]

It can get better.

Courtney Campbell: Thank you Ms. Pickett for talking with us today. We really appreciate it, again.

Eddye Pickett: Okay.

[End of Audio]