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Ricky Tucker, 2011

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Nene Bafford: On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom, I wanted to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Nene Bafford, graduate of Rhodes College.

John Payne: And I'm Jonathan Payne, a senior at Rhodes College.

Nene Bafford: And we're honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational stories. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. We're gonna start off with some basic questions. What's your name?

Ricky Tucker: Hello, my name is Ricky Tucker.

Nene Bafford: What year were you born?

Ricky Tucker: Are you sure you wanna ask that question?

[Laughter]

I was born February the 9th, 1957.

Nene Bafford: And where were you born and raised?

Ricky Tucker: Born in Memphis, Tennessee, this exclusive community called Binghampton, and I'm an only child.

Nene Bafford: Okay. What is your occupation?

Ricky Tucker: Currently, my wife and I are the owners of Rick's International. We provide staff development and training, business consulting, and life business coaching.

Nene Bafford: And could you tell us who are your parents?

Ricky Tucker: My parents? Both of my parents –

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are deceased. My biological parents are deceased. My biological father's name is William Tucker. My mother's name is Juanita Payne. And my dad, I refer to him as my dad because he really is my father, and his name is Howard Payne. He's living now, and he is the chief pilot for Richards Aviation.

Nene Bafford: Great.

John Payne: Okay. What was the city of Memphis like when you were a child?

Ricky Tucker: I think, as a child in my small world, it was all right, because as I said, my world was somewhat small, pretty much restricted to the community that I was born and raised in. And as I got older, obviously my exposure to other communities was broadened, but I was fortunate enough to really see the good side of Memphis. I was involved in baseball

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as a junior high student. I was also in the band as a junior high student. And I was a WLOK teenage reporter from the time I was in the 10th grade. So I was pretty busy, and the only experience that I had that I would say was unfavorable was a friend of mine, **Carrey Blakeney** and I, were going for a walk one evening and we were stopped by a police officer. And he said, you know, "Where are you boys going?" And we hadn't done anything, and I really couldn't understand why.

And I did not – I didn't care for that. And the next morning I said to my mom, I really wanted to move to another area of town so I would not get in trouble for something that I didn't do. And as a result of that, we moved to Whitehaven, and I felt

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a bit more comfortable there, simply because, apparently again, there was nothing that was being done that was negative, but I guess, you know, since – because of that particular time, there was some sensitivity, I guess, that went on that caused that kind of a response. And so, again, my exposure was always – was pleasant, overall, with having been exposed to all of the other high school reporters from all of the other schools around the city. At my 10th grade year, a gentleman by the name of Mr. Taylor, who was my distributive education teacher, entered me into a distributive education contest, a sales contest. I placed second in the state in that sales contest, and as a result he helped me to get a job.

John Payne: That's great.

Ricky Tucker: So as an 11th grader, I was going to school, playing in the band, and –

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then going to Baker's Shoe Store in Laurelwood as a shoe salesman. So thanks to Captain Taylor for believing in me, and he has since passed away. So I'm forever grateful for him. Also, if I were to go back a bit, there is a gentleman by the name of Ralph Taylor, as I was an 8th grader in my geography class, I can remember Ralph Taylor coming to speak to our class, and he came from Kellogg's. And the things that he said spoke directly to me, to the degree that they have impacted me even to this day, and I get the opportunity to see Mr. Taylor from time to time and tell him thanks, and remind him for the – that he spoke into him.

John Payne: Yeah. That's great. That was a lot of great stuff.

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Just out of curiosity, what was your experience like as a WLOK teen reporter?

Ricky Tucker: Yes, it was a WLOK teenage reporter. It was incredible. It was actually – it was an organization of high school reporters, and we were sponsored by the radio station. And the two people who were kind enough to volunteer, and once again, speak into our lives, were **Osie Wallace** and **Sherman Austin**. Sherman Austin, I believe, just recently retired from Memphis city schools, and Osie Wallace is a minister now. Both of these men really served as role models and mentors to me, and so they too were part of that village, if you will, that really helped to shape and mold me to be the person that I am now.

And I'm forever grateful for them and some of the other folks that have impacted me.

[00:06:06.5] FIRST CUT

John Payne: That's great, that's great. Just slightly – a big shift, because – we're going to get into some questions about the carnivals, one being: What were the cotton carnival and the cotton maker's jubilee like when you were a child?

Ricky Tucker: When I was small, my exposure was somewhat limited to the cotton carnival. And I will say that I know that the cotton carnival parade was always a big deal, and it was always something that was looked forward to. I learned more and more about carnival as I became a young adult. There was a gentleman by the name of

Marvin Womack, he's another person, another gentleman, who really made an influence in my life. Mr. Womack, for some reason

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just really believed in me, he really wanted to shape and mold me to become a businessman. And so, as a result, there was a lot of exposure to a number of different business meetings that he would take me to, and ultimately took me to meet Clyde Venson. Mr. Vincent is the son, I believe, of R.Q. Venson, who was a founder of the cotton maker's jubilee; and Mrs. Ethyl Venson was his wife. I got the opportunity to meet Mr. Venson, who is just an incredibly strong man, strong willed man, very decisive, very direct, and he got things done. So as a result of Mr. Womack introducing me to Mr. Venson, we got to know one another, and I think he felt – and trusted me enough to

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at least run for king of jubilee. So they gave me the opportunity, and Mr. Womack supported me, encouraged me, and through his help and encouragement I was able to win king that year.

John Payne:

Yeah, that's great. Yeah, that was a later question I was gonna ask. How do you become king of a Cotton Maker's Jubilee?

Ricky Tucker:

Well, you know, for that particular time, and it could be a little bit different now, I think a lot of it had to do with exposure, and some had to do with – it was more of a way of raising funds, quite honestly, for the organization, because obviously, there were things that had to be taken care of. We had to have these incredibly awesome uniforms, if you will, and I say that kind of tongue-in-cheek.

[Laughter]

But you know, we had to have – so there were a number of things that the organization had, so a great deal of it was done –

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by – through fundraising and through just exposure.

John Payne: Well, great. In relation to other social events in Memphis, how popular were the cotton carnival and cotton maker's jubilee celebrations, the parades I guess and the events themselves?

Ricky Tucker: Well, I can tell you, as I think about other events that are held in Memphis back during that time, as well as now, I think people really looked forward to it. For example, I would say that a big event, primarily in the African-American community now would be Africa in April. And Dr. and Mrs. **Acey** are doing an incredible job, thereby drawing from countries around the world. But I think at that time, the cotton maker's jubilee was something that really – people really looked forward to –

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and they participated in quite extensively. And I'll tell you that as I became more involved with the program, and having been exposed to it the year before, and then being the king for that year, I just did not realize the level of exposure that you get, and quite honestly, how many people were really excited about attending things like the parades. There were a lot of social organi-, events, if you will, and the participation was always, I'd say, at a maximum. *[Laughs]*

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SECOND CUT

John Payne: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, well, that was another question I was – I'm gonna ask. More specifically, in terms of growing up, when did the carnivals become less of a social event, and did they mean something greater to you when you were growing up?

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Because obviously your experiences being in the carnival as a participant, being king, I'm sure that definitely changed the way that you looked at the event?

Ricky Tucker: It did change the way I looked at it. I was not – I wasn't that familiar with it prior to my earlier adult years. And just before becoming king, say a year or two prior to that, I didn't know very much about it, but the more I got involved, and even as the king, I realized that it was more – some people looked at it as, okay, you've got parades, you've got parties. And I promise you, there were a lot of parades, and there were a lot of parties. The one thing that has been consistent throughout my life is self-care. So even during that time, and especially during the time of –

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me being a king, that was something that I really had to focus on, because you can have just one incredible time, and there's just so much fun that there is to be had during that season. But you know, the other piece of that is it really is bigger and more than just the fun, because some of the crews, and they're referred to as crews, the different organizations, some of the crews had really more of a deeper meaning. For example, maybe going to a St. Jude, I can remember going to speak at certain organizations. So there were times when it was less about having fun and more about what we could do in the community, and putting on more of a serious and a business face. Because quite honestly –

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Clive Venson is all about business, at that time, and I haven't spoken to him in a number of years, but I will tell you that he was a man that was about business.

John Payne:

Interesting. Well, because you mentioned crews, and I was curious – so more, I guess, organizations, businesses, could they be a part of the carnivals? I guess, like, what – who is a part of the crews?

Ricky Tucker:

Yeah, the different crews, they are under certain names. One that stands out in my mind is the boweavils. And the boweavils had this old fire engine. It was green. They had boweavil outfits and all of that stuff, so there were different crews, or different organizations. For example, we were – I was the – I was king Ricky Tucker from the house –

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of jubilee. And the house of jubilee represented just one of the crews.

John Payne:

Now, I was curious, because in 1981 the cotton carnival invited the cotton maker's jubilee to become a **green** crew for their carnival. And I was wondering, so, in 1991, what was, I guess, the relationship between the cotton carnival and the cotton maker's jubilee?

Ricky Tucker:

The cotton carnival is an event, and that is more of when you have rides and foods that the people probably shouldn't be eating, *[Laughs]* but lots of fun. And it was more of a faire, if you will,

kind of like going to the fairgrounds or an amusement park of a sort. And that carnival invited jubilee to just come and participate.

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If my memory serves me correctly, I believe the cotton carnival was set aside more for the African-American community, and jubilee, obviously, with having been a black organization, they were invited to come and participate. And I do believe we attended the cotton carnival just to make our rounds, to give our king and queen and royal court waves, and to say whatever we chose to say in the form of a speech during the cotton carnival.

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THIRD CUT

John Payne:

In 1991, what social and/or racial issues were prevalent in Memphis, and what was Memphis like when you were the king of the cotton maker's jubilee?

Ricky Tucker:

Well, I'll tell you, the overall climate of the city was not a lot different than it was during the time that Martin Luther King was murdered here. But the one thing that I will tell you is that during carnival season, and during the time that all of the organizations were together, you would've thought you were in a different city, because all of the racism and the classism, if you will, was all broken down; there were no walls. So there was, quite honestly, not any difference in me as the king of jubilee, and the king of another crew. We were all pretty much treated the same way. We – the mode of transportation was just about the same.

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So I was fortunate enough to have a limousine to come and pick me up to go to all of the events, and you know, so I may have even been better off than some of the other guys from some of the other crews, because they may have had to drive themselves. But again, thanks to Mr. Venson and Mr. Womack with really wanting to do things in a classy way, they did that. So as it relates to the overall organization and carnival season, I didn't really see or experience any differences. And of course, this is the way I'm wired. I tend to not look at that. I tend to look at things from a more broad perspective, but the climate in Memphis, unfortunately, at that time, and you know, this is 2011, and unfortunately, we still see some areas that we need to change.

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John Payne: In the 1991 cotton maker's jubilee event pamphlet you state the following in your biography: "I am committed to young people because there is a void in their lives. I'll do what I can to keep them on the right track." Did your experiences as the king help you lead and impact younger people in your community, and how so?

Ricky Tucker: I think that it did. So my short answer would be: yes. And the reason being is there are a lot of times when we can say one thing, but we do something different. And for the young people to just see an African-American king in a parade, and he's the only African-American king, even if it is a social event, that symbolizes something to little children, because it lets them know, "Wow, that's a king. I could even be a king, or I could do something positive."

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And then having the opportunity to go to different organizations and different places and to actually talk to and speak into the lives of young people. And you know, it is purely through divine intervention that I felt that way then, in 1991, and it is 2011 now and my wife and I own a business, and our impact is to – or our goal really is to make an impact, a positive impact, in the lives of young people and adults. And we're fortunate enough to do what we were born to do, and we feel like we're doing a pretty good job of it. But we have to invest in our young people now, because they're our most valuable asset. I felt that way then, and I'm fortunate enough to share my life with somebody who really feels the same way. And so we are still doing the same thing.

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John Payne: Yeah, because you know, today, you know, we have organizations like Bridges that works to empower young people and to educate them on, you know, social justice issues and educational issues. And there are a lot of organizations that – and a lot of, you know, events, that- that are available to young people in Memphis now. And I was wondering, was that the case in 1991? Was that the case when you were growing up as an adolescent? Did you have these similar resources, and did the carnivals maybe play that role, or - ?

Ricky Tucker: As a younger person in school, the organizations for me, and I was very fortunate as I think back, for me, I had, as I mentioned earlier, the WLOK reporters. That was something that was –

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very unique.

John Payne: Yeah.

Ricky Tucker: But it was so helpful for me that I can't even – I can't just – the words can't describe – I can't find the words to describe how helpful that was for me. And then I think about – again, this is just a structured situation, but my being a member of the distributive education program. I'm sure that, obviously, there was the YMCA and the YWCA, there were community centers. There was the **Lester** Community Center that was in the Big Hampton area that was available. But quite honestly, I was so busy with the distributive education assignment, and with the WLOK reporters, that I didn't have time for some of the others. And my dad, Howard Payne, by that time, my mother had met him –

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and I was working in the summers even with the Payne family, because they had their own business as well. So there were some other organizations, the traditional ones, Boy Scouts, the YMCA. I was not a boy scout, and I didn't participate in the YMCA, but those other organizations were really helpful and they were really – I think they were just designed specifically for me.

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FOURTH CUT

John Payne: That's great. Because I guess this question is general, in that I personally don't know the specifics, but what happened to the cotton maker's jubilee? Is it still happening, or - ?

Ricky Tucker: I believe that it is still happening, and it is under a different name. It is under the name of **Kimmet**, now.

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And I would say that I'm embarrassed that I don't recall. I've moved away from Memphis, and I've come back; lived away for a while. And I know that the name is Kimmet, and no more cotton maker's jubilee. Once again, that speaks to Mr. Vincent, because

he's forward thinking and, obviously, if you'll think about the cotton maker's jubilee, it doesn't really have a positive 2011 spin to it, so. *[Laughs]* But he – again, you know, with his forward thinking, I'm sure that he saw fit to change the name to Kimmet.

John Payne: That's interesting, because I think that leads into the next question nicely, in that: Would you consider the cotton carnival and the cotton maker's jubilee events to be a celebration of the cotton industry, or like, that history –

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of cotton?

Ricky Tucker: I think it kind of spoke to that industry maybe at that time. Once again, really thinking about from whence we've come, and maybe some of the things that were done back in that time, but again, thinking – and thinking about Mr. Vincent I have to smile, because we had a number of conversations in the past and as I talk I think about those things, but once again, that may have been fashionable, if you will, at that time. But as the time goes, obviously, you know, it causes – you know, there's a cause for change. And with him changing with the time, something that –

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was acceptable at one time would not be acceptable today, not in his mind, probably not in most of our minds, so.

John Payne: I'm just curious, because you mentioned conversations with Dr. Venson in this respect to the carnivals, and maybe the way they look at history, the way that, you know, viewers – I guess, how do we understand history with, you know, an event, but can you maybe shed some light on some of those conversations, or - ?

Ricky Tucker: Well, really, most of the conversations that he and Mr. Womack and I would have, particularly as it relates to the cotton maker's jubilee, was – the focus was more on us as –

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a race, if you will, being represented, number one. Number two, the foundation, and I believe the backbone, of the cotton maker's jubilee really began with Dr. R. Q. Venson, and notice I said "Doctor." And there was a foundation that was built, and that foundation was based upon education, primarily. So it had more of

a positive spin than – versus one of just pure entertainment, because there were scholarships that were given, the R.Q. Vincent Educational Scholarship, I believe, has been around for a great number of years, and I know that it was offered at that time.

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FIFTH CUT

John Payne:

That's great. And with that aspect on education and community and, you know –

I guess empowerment, do you feel that a lot of the black community at Memphis was onboard to, to- I guess, partake in the cotton maker's jubilee?

Ricky Tucker:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. To be honest, with you asking me that question, I don't think I've ever experienced anyone having anything negative to say about the cotton maker's jubilee or the event at all. All of my experiences, all of my thoughts were positive in nature. The people that I came in contact with, as a matter of fact, as I was reading the program just prior to the interview, it really brought to mind some of the people that –

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participated, and you know, reminded me that I probably need to contact some of them and just tell them, "Thanks," because there were a number of folks that participated, and I'd even forgotten that some of them did.

John Payne:

Yeah.

Ricky Tucker:

So it was positive. Everything about it that I can recall was positive in nature. And I made it my goal to make sure that I represented the organization in as professional a manner as I possibly could, because I respected, and I still do have an incredible amount of respect for, Mr. Vincent, for Dr. Vincent, Mrs. Vincent as a matter of fact. She attended a lot of the events that – usually that were a little bit earlier, but that was Clive Vincent's mother. So she was active there. She was well respected. Dr. R.Q. Vincent –

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was respected in the community as well.

John Payne: Okay, great. If you can go back in time, or if you could be king again, would you have done anything differently?

Ricky Tucker: I think with – now that my wife and I have our own business, and we’ve been in business for a few years, I would- I would probably tighten my message up just a little bit more, and I would really push for the young people, and the older people alike, to really pursue their dreams, and to pursue excellence. Our business is – it’s- it’s Rick’s International, and we were working with someone and they said, “Well, what does the Rix, R-I-X, stand for?” And my wife and I looked at one another, and it’s: respect, integrity and excellence. And so I would share that with young people –

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Particularly, our young people. And one of the sayings that I have is: I won’t let you off the hook. Because – so my message would, philosophically, be the same, but would really have more of a laser focus, because we’ve just got so much talent out there, and our people need to know, our young people especially. They need to know that they’re incredible, and they’re one of a kind, and nobody else plays their music; nobody. And that’s what my wife and I say all the time. There is no one else in the entire world like you, or like me. So my message would be laser focused.

John Payne: Great.

Ricky Tucker: Maybe I should try for king again.

[Laughter]

[00:30.52.14] SIXTH CUT

John Payne: Well –

Nene Bafford: I have no questions.

John Payne: I have no more questions. [Laughs]

Nene Bafford: You did great.

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John Payne: Well, thank you for participating. Do you have any questions for us, or - ?

Ricky Tucker: Well, I will say that when I was contacted by you, that I was impressed, first of all, that you had done the research, and you were able to find that bit of history. And I was honored that you called, and honored that you would want to talk with me. And – because as my wife and I talked, as we were preparing to interview with you, I think it’s important for people to know that even in the midst of people having a good time, there are some serious things, and there is a lot of business that can be taken care of. So this gives me an opportunity to share with people that the cotton maker’s jubilee and that carnival season is about more than just having fun.

John Payne: Yeah.

Ricky Tucker: It is about impacting lives –

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and changing lives, and speaking into the lives of younger people and- and adults as well. And I must admit to that, with having the opportunity to meet the team of people here, I will give the message that I would give if I were king now and say to you, that I’m really encouraged by you, and that I’m not gonna let you off the hook, because –

[Laughter]

obviously there’s some greatness that you have, and after the interview is over then we’re gonna talk about what we can do to help to continue your success. So and my wife and I, Gwendolyn Tucker, would like to just say, you know, on behalf of the Tucker family, the royal house of Tuckers, and Rix International, that we really appreciate you for giving us the opportunity.

Nene Bafford: Well, thank you. We really appreciate you.

John Payne: Thank you so much.

[Audio End at 00:32:59.14]