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Linda Burgess, 2013

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Linda All[0:00:00]

Allison Henry: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom and the Center for Transforming Communities, we'd like to thank you for sharing your experience story today.

Linda Burgess: Thank you, Allison.

Allison Henry: First question, what is your name?

Linda Burgess: My name is Linda Burgess.

Allison Henry: When and where were you born?

Linda Burgess: Do I have to tell when I was born? *[laughter]* I was born here in Memphis. I'm a native Memphian, and I was born in 1948.

Allison Henry: What is your occupation?

Linda Burgess: Occupation? I'll just say that my degree was in sociology at the University of Memphis, because they did not have a degree in social work at that year, but I went into social work.

Allison Henry: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Linda Burgess: I have one brother and one sister.

Allison Henry: What was your home life like?

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Linda Burgess: My home life? I grew up in a children's home from about six weeks of age until about 11 years old. What was called Porter-Leath Orphanage back then, and then I went home from 11 years old until age 18 to live with my extended family.

Allison Henry: Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Linda Burgess: The neighborhood I grew up in – let me think, because the first 11 years was over in downtown, at Chelsea and Manassas. That was where – but because I lived in the children's home, it was more contained, and so I kind of lived – my community was the children's home. Other than going to the church, the Baptist church on Sunday, and field trips –

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things like that, outside the community.

And then after that when I went home at age 11, I grew up in midtown, went to Central High School and graduated from Central High School, and pretty much just contained, like living on my street and community, that kind of thing.

Allison Henry: What school did you go attend?

Linda Burgess: Pardon me?

Allison Henry: What school did you attend?

Linda Burgess: Guthrie School in elementary years; Bellevue Junior High and Elementary; Central High School – high school; and then the University of Memphis.

Allison Henry: What activities were you involved in?

Linda Burgess: What activities? In junior high and high school –

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[clears throat] excuse me, please – I was mainly in the chorus – loved being in the chorus in junior high and high school; was not really that involved otherwise in junior high and high school.

Allison Henry: Can you share some of your memories from your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

Linda Burgess: That?

Allison Henry: Influenced later on in life.

Linda Burgess: Some of the memories. I think living in the children's home was a great influence. I was very thankful to be there. I believe that God was the one who had me placed there.

Had I grown up in my own home, I don't know where I'd be today, and so it was a Godsend that I lived in the children's home and enjoyed being there.

Experiences when I went home were difficult because –

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I was sheltered, very sheltered the first 11 years of my life, and so I was, wow, opened to the world. For example, first year I was in my home, someone in my family tried to sexually molest me, and so – who molested me when I just visited my home in the years that I was in the children's home, and there were a lot of problems in that home. And so those were difficult years for me.

I did not enjoy going to school that much because of the trauma in my home, but at some point an uncle chose to be a fatherly image to me and shaped up, you might say, and that really helped me through my junior high and high school years.

Allison Henry: Did you belong to a church growing up?

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Linda Burgess: I did. I belonged to the Baptist church in the children's home. When I came home from the children's home, it was strict Church of Christ in my family. And then when I – in my college years, I sought the Lord more, wanting to know more about life and wanting to know more about him; entered into charismatic movement and church, and so now I'm back in a traditional Baptist church, but I see myself as a follower of Jesus, and not as belonging to any particular, what do you call it, denomination.

Allison Henry: Who were your role models?

Linda Burgess: Who were my role models? I loved my mother. My mother was a role model to me, even though I didn't appreciate her in the years –

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when I was growing up. But now I look back and I see what a role model she was to me.

The uncle that became like a father to me was a role model. A teacher in one of my elementary school – role model. A pastor's wife in my charismatic years.

I guess that's enough.

Allison Henry: Are you married?

Linda Burgess: I am.

Allison Henry: Do you have any children?

Linda Burgess: I do. I have two grown children, two sons.

Allison Henry: Are there any stories in particular from this period you'd like to share with us?

Linda Burgess: Are there any stories in – say it again?

Allison Henry: In particular from this period that you'd like to share with us.

Linda Burgess: In this particular year.

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I'm trying to think about – if I were to share anything, it would be the last few years being in this neighborhood, and probably about three or four years ago, when Shalom, a Christian organization, came to this community and began to connect churches and Christian organizations in this community – began to connect us together and we began to see ourselves as a team working together in this community.

And to me, that's been the most exciting years, even thus far, because having been in this community 40 years – did not grow up in this community.

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Married – and that's when I came to this community, when my husband already had a house, and rented a house. And that's – then when we married, then I came to live in this community. And so I have – the Lord has given me a heart over the years for this community, and it's been within the last three or four years that I have began to see a dramatic change in this community, and it's been very exciting.

Allison Henry: Were you involved in your neighborhood?

Linda Burgess: Yes. Yes, Allison. I was involved in the neighborhood. Actually, I homeschooled my children, starting 30 years ago, and I started homeschooling my children. And because I started homeschooling, I was really not that involved, because I was so inward-

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trying to teach my children.

But then after they grew up, then I became more involved in this community – neighborhood watch coordinator for my street. My husband and I began to do more outreach through my church. And SOS was in my church gym, and so I began to tutor through SOS Ministries. No, I'm sorry, it was not SOS. It was Streets Ministry. Streets Ministry was there, and so I began to tutor there and then – and I began to tutor kid in the neighborhood that went to Treadwell that live on my street and surround me.

And then Shalom came along, which really opened me up to –

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connecting with other people in this community who were leaders and really wanted to invested in this community.

Allison Henry:

What are the main differences between Highland Heights 40 years ago and now?

Linda Burgess:

Oh, wow. As I have already reiterated, just I the last three or four years, I've seen a dramatic change, and I have to say this, a lot of people in this neighborhood have not see that yet, because as I have shared with people in the community about the good that's going on in this community, it's like I don't – they don't see that. But because I have been involved in the churches – Holland Heights United Methodist, Holland Heights Baptist Church, and New Tyler AME Church – especially in this community, we have drawn closer together

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and come to work as a team in reaching out to this neighborhood. And then in the last three years, to see Service Over Self, Streets Ministry, Treadwell School, the junior high. The junior high principal has just within the last year or two, for myself, being involved with Shalom and the coalition. The coalition that's in this neighborhood.

To me, it's dramatically changed and I'm really excited about what's going on through so many other organizations that I don't know, and I'm sorry I'm not giving them credit.

Allison Henry:

Were you working during 1950 through 1970?

Linda Burgess: 1950 – two years old, so I'm trying to think. [laughter]

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Two years old. I was 18, so – 1970, is that what you said? '50 through '70? So I was 20 years old in 1970. Was I working at a job or in this community? What are you saying?

Allison Henry: A job.

Linda Burgess: Yes.

Allison Henry: If so, where did you work and what did you do?

Linda Burgess: I worked at AT&T, American Telephone Telegraph. I was a long distance operator on the cord boards, old switch boards, where you've seen – if you've ever seen people plug into a switchboard. I did long distance, and so that is actually what got me through school, through the University of Memphis for the most part, because they paid – as I worked with them, they helped pay for my college education.

So the last year of my sixth year in school –

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at the UofM, I was able to have saved enough money that I quit AT&T and began going full-time to the University of Memphis, and then I graduated.

Allison Henry: Did segregation or integration shape your experience at work?

Linda Burgess: Yes, it did, because before – when I was at AT&T, which was around 1968 to 1972, something like that, I had not worked with different ethnic groups. At Central High School, it's just white people. Integration had not started, and so it was a new experience for me at AT&T to be able to work with other ethnic groups and I loved it. It opened up a whole new world to me, that wow, this world –

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is bigger than white people, and so I loved that. And so that was a very good experience with AT&T. And then I went on to the University of Memphis, where wow, that opened me up to

different ethnic groups across the world. And so it was a very good, positive experience.

Allison Henry: How has that experience shaped your involvement in the community today?

Linda Burgess: How has my work experience – well, being in social work too, after I graduated from the University of Memphis, then I went into – I worked for the Department of Human Services, and so I worked – I found out later after I left that community that it was probably one of the most communities in midtown, but at that time identification didn't know that. I mean, I just loved the people. It wasn't all-black community in which –

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I worked, and it definitely – first time, having lived a very sheltered life, it was a very good experience to get out, because I had to go into the field, and I worked over at LeMoyné Garden area over there at Crump and Danny Thomas. And so that definitely opened me up to new experiences and understanding people, understanding especially now, because I worked in social work especially there. Then I went into the homes of people and I began to see what kinds of homes, how they lived. And so that definitely helped me to understand as I came back into this community, I knew the home life. I experienced and saw their homes lives, so it gave me a better understanding and –

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patience and love for those – for the people.

Allison Henry: Were there people in your life who helped to shape ____ civil rights.

Linda Burgess: In regard to civil rights? I have to tell you that the most important person that influenced me regarding civil rights was Jesus Christ. He was the one – Jesus is the one that helped me to understand the worth of a human being and the value of a human being, and to teach me how we're to approach one another.

So I have to tell you that Jesus Christ without a doubt was the greatest influence and is the greatest influence on my life in that area.

Allison Henry: Would you consider yourself someone who was active in civil rights movement? If so, what did you do?

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Linda Burgess: Here's the way that I was – I was not involved directly with the civil rights movement, but in situations such as – let me give you an example. For the last 25 years, I've worked at a crisis pregnancy center, and so I volunteered. And so I see myself as working for the rights of human being through organizations like that, in teaching the women and the girls who come into the crisis pregnancy center that they have value and they have worth, and that there is hope for them. There is a new life offered –

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to them. And also in regard to the babies that they were carrying, that those babies had rights also, and that they had worth.

And so, while I was not directly involved, I would see myself as very involved as an individual in a community in those kinds of rights.

Allison Henry: What are the positive and negative aspects of the Holland Heights community?

Linda Burgess: Okay, ask the question again.

Allison Henry: What are the positive and negative aspects of the Holland Heights community?

Linda Burgess: I think before Shalom came along in connecting, bringing our community together, I saw myself as out –

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there. I was connected to a church. I joined that particular church because at that time they were reaching out to our community and ministering to all people in the community.

But even then, there was something missing, and because I lived in the community, and a lot of the people that attended our church lived out somewhere else, I still did not have that hope and power about a community, Christians in our community coming together and connecting and being a team to work together in this community.

And so before I came to Shalom, it was like I felt disconnected – still disconnected. Even though I was a part of the –

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church, I still saw there was something more that God wanted to do in this community, even maybe that was not a part of a church. Maybe it should have been a part of a church, but it wasn't happening.

And so then when I joined the Shalom organization, I began to see, oh, God, this is what you mean about bringing a community together, and also just the last two years, about Treadwell School being a part of that community that we much embrace.

Allison Henry: How did you become involved with the Shalom zone?

Linda Burgess: Actually there was two seniors in our church that was going through this Shalom training at that time, and they –

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encouraged me, "You ought to come to the Shalom training." Well, at that time, a crisis was beginning in my own family and I could not – and my mother had just died too – and I could not see myself as being involved, and so I said, "Okay, okay, yeah, I hear you."

And so when those people that were going to the training had to stop because of an accident that one of the people had, then they said, "Please come. Please come and take my place," and so it was one more organization that I thought I didn't need to be involved in. But once I attended a meeting, it's like God showed me, ah, you're to be a part of this. So that's how I became involved.

Allison Henry: DO you remember when you started hearing about ___ and civil rights demonstrations?

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Linda Burgess: I do, and I was in high school, and it did – I heard about it, but I didn't really get involved at that time. But then probably what helped to open my eyes was I was downtown when Martin Luther King was shot and killed – Dr. Martin Luther King – and so that really came home to me, that wow, we've had someone

assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, and I really to know him that well, but I began from that moment on, began to learn about him and begin to appreciate him.

And so just in my own life, began to see that –

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God has called me for something more than through the church, or whatever.

Allison Henry: How did you feel about people getting involved?

Linda Burgess: In what?

Allison Henry: With –

Linda Burgess: Civil rights or what?

Allison Henry: Civil rights.

Linda Burgess: God bless them.

Allison Henry: What is your main role in Shalom zone?

Linda Burgess: Whoa, what is my main role. Didn't know until I – as time is progressing, I'm learning. I'm learning. My main role in Shalom while I'm – I'm a director on the Board of Directors there, and had no idea why I got that position or whatever, but then I began –

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to see – I've been a part – I'm now coordinating the prayer walk, or Walk and Pray, that is done in the spring, which is exciting, because it's drawing – it's bringing the Christian community together, and churches in the community together, which is forming more of a solid base for reaching out to the community and caring about the community.

And then things like the day camp. I'm involved in the – it's somewhat. I'm not involved in direct leadership, but I'm kind of on the sidelines over here, recruiting kids of the day camp, and I love that, because I want to see my kids in this community to be able to be a part of that experience. So those are the kinds of things –

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that I'm involved in.

Allison Henry: How long have you been in the organization?

Linda Burgess: I've only been in – Shalom has actually only been here three or – three years maybe. Don't quote me, but about three years, and so I've only been three years here, 'cause it's new here.

Allison Henry: What do you like about working with the youth?

Linda Burgess: Okay, let me just mention. I'm sorry, I haven't been saying that our Shalom zone is called The Corners. The overall center for transforming communities and Shalom, but our particular area right here is called The Corners of H.

Okay, now what was your question?

Allison Henry: What do you like about working with the youth?

Linda Burgess: Working with the youth. I teach middle school at my church on Sunday and I love middle school kids.

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They are great. Great. People don't know what they are missing by not being involved with the middle school kids.

What I love is – and I think it goes back to the way I was born. I was born as an illegitimate child in a time when it was very frowned upon to be – for my mother to have three illegitimate children. She suffered a lot because she chose to keep us, and that made it – she invited more suffering upon herself in a way.

And so as a result of being born that way, I came to realize early, because of the suffering that I incurred as an – unfortunately the children are punished too in this society.

And so what I bring into that in working –

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with young people is it doesn't matter how you came into this world. It matters how you go out of this world, and so I want to be able to give children a hope that it doesn't matter what your circumstances are. There is someone who can help you to

overcome your circumstance, and so it's how you take those circumstances and let them be turned into victory, instead of pull you down.

And so that's what I love about working with young people, is giving them – inspiring them that they have a hope and a future, especially through Jesus – but anyway, okay.

Allison Henry: Do you see young people starting to make the community better?

Linda Burgess: Do I see who?

Allison Henry: Young people starting to make the community –

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better.

Linda Burgess: Not anywhere near what I hope and believe that there will be. I'm sorry that I don't see that anywhere near what it should be, and my heart breaks, and that's through that that's causing me to press in more and more to reaching out to young people in my neighborhood so that they can become what they need to become in this neighborhood.

Allison Henry: How is Shalom being incorporated with The Corners of Highland Heights?

Linda Burgess: I haven't mentioned the – forgive me, I haven't mentioned the –

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works. Come on –

Male: _____.

Linda Burgess: Thank you – First Works, I'm sorry, that is an organization under Shalom now also. I'm not really that much involved in it, because you can't be involved in everything.

And so First Works, it tutors; takes the kids from Treadwell and in the community, and tutors them. It is very professional organization that not only just tutors them, but also becomes involved in their lives in other ways, and helps to support them; helps to work with the parents, apart from the tutoring program,

and so they're very – they're building a foundation, a good foundation - in this neighborhood –

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for the kids who are coming up in this neighborhood.

Allison Henry: After this – thank you for being a part of our project in sharing your story.

Linda Burgess: Allison, you were great. Thank you for interviewing me.
[laughter]

[End of Audio]