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Sonja Wyatt, 2014

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Shane Watson: Okay, today is June 17th, and on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom Rhodes College, and Team For Success we'd like to thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. My name is Shane Watson.

We're honored to meet with you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived only at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you please state some background information, like what is your name?

Sonja Wyatt: My name is Sonja Wyatt.

Shane Watson: Thank you. And if you don't mind, can you tell us what year you were born in?

Sonja Wyatt: I was born in 1952.

Shane Watson: Okay. And were you born and raised in Lake County?

Sonja Wyatt: Yes.

Shane Watson: So what would you say that was like growing up in Lake County?

Sonja Wyatt: It was good. It was better back then than it is now.

Shane Watson: Really?

Sonja Wyatt: I think so.

Shane Watson: Can you expand on that a little bit?

Sonja Wyatt: Well, back then you had more neighbors and more role models with children now. Today you don't have that kind of role model.

[0:01:00.0] When I was coming up, everybody's purse was your purse. Now you cannot do that.

Shane Watson: Okay. So who would you say your role models were when you were growing up?

Sonja Wyatt: My role model was Ms. Meryl Robinson. She's dead now.

Shane Watson: Okay, and why would you think she was your role model?

Sonja Wyatt: Because she was concerned about her kids. She didn't have any, but she was concerned about all of her students that she taught, and she was a good teacher.

Shane Watson: Okay, so she basically invited the whole like —

Sonja Wyatt: Right.

Shane Watson: It takes a village to raise a child.

Sonja Wyatt: Right. Right.

Shane Watson: Okay. So speaking of other children within the community, did you have any brothers or sisters growing up?

Sonja Wyatt: I had five.

Shane Watson: And where did you fall in the line of brothers and sisters?

Sonja Wyatt: I'm the oldest.

Shane Watson: What was it like being the oldest of five children?

Sonja Wyatt: Being the oldest, everybody looked up to you. And my sister, me and her was —

[0:02:00.1] very close, because we are four years apart. And then later on in the years, we're a good margin apart, my sister and brother, but I'm the oldest.

Shane Watson: Okay. So now we're going to switch away from brothers and sisters.

Sonja Wyatt: Okay.

Shane Watson: And we're going to talk about your educational experiences. So correct me if I'm wrong, but you did attend Lincoln High School, correct?

Sonja Wyatt: Yes.

Shane Watson: And can you describe what that was like?

Sonja Wyatt: Lincoln High School, it was something like a family school. Everybody wanted you to get an education, and everybody worked around everybody's kids. Because back then it's just like it is now. We had kids that didn't have a father. It was a one-parent family. But the teachers and the principal and stuff like that played a big role in some of the children's lives back then.

And like I said, now you know, we don't have that family role. We don't.

[0:03:00.1]

But back then everybody was concerned about your child, you know. But now people aren't concerned about your child. They will help your child to do wrong. But see, back then when we was coming up, you done something wrong over at my momma's house, you got a whooping. When you went home you got another one. It wasn't that you didn't do it, you know.

And we had respect. And the churches played a big role back then. Big role. Churches. The mothers in the church. The Deacon in the church. They played a big role with children. You don't see that anymore.

See back then when I come up, a single parent that didn't have a man in the house, the Deacon went by to see this single woman and see what she needed done. We don't have that now. Same about the mother. The mother took on the young girls and taught them how to be ladies.

[0:04:00.0]

Also, the Deacon men taught the boys how to be men. We don't have that anymore. The role model is gone. That's why our kids is running rapid, and the prison is running over. Because what? Everybody is going their separate ways. Nobody loves anybody anymore. We've got lip service, but we don't have the heart service.

But me, I love everybody's child, and try to help everybody's child. But I'm a person like this here. I tell you up front, if you're bad I don't fool with you. I don't care if you're my grandchildren. I've got grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I'm sorry. When you are disrespectful of your elders, and your parents, I don't have any use for you. And I'm a person like this here. Your words are suppose to be your bond. When your word ain't worth a quarter, you ain't worth a quarter.

Shane Watson:

All right. So you spoke about how the church was a big influence in the life of a child back in your day. Can you explain what your church life —

[0:05:00.1]

was like when you were a younger child?

Sonja Wyatt:

In my younger days church, when I went to church, children always sat in front. You didn't sit behind. Parents and your

mothers, they didn't allow that. Everybody come to the front because we were taught you fill up the front, and whoever's late, they sit behind. But nowadays, you know, we sit anywhere.

When we went to church, you had your ushers at the door. They seated you. You didn't tell them where you wanted to be seated. They seated you. And you stayed there. You didn't run all over the church. You didn't play in church. You didn't chew gum in church. You sat there. I didn't care how big you got, you had an Easter speech, and I tell you what. One year I had an Easter speech and I'd be mamma —

[0:06:00.0]

I'm too big to say an Easter speech. She's like not as long as you're in my house you're not.

But you know, nowadays kids don't even have Easter speech. Some kids can hardly read. It's sad that our school system is letting kids go through that they struggle with reading. It's sad. But it goes back to home. It starts at home, and that's where . But like I said, when we was coming up, we didn't do all this here that these kids are doing, and we was in church Sunday, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and Wednesday evening. And before you had revival, you went in a shut-in for a whole week to tarry. Now you don't do that anymore.

And you didn't put people in a position. You was taught. You didn't walk up and get in the choir stand. You was taught. You didn't walk in and get on the usher boy.

[0:07:00.3]

You was taught. You didn't walk in and get on the Deacon board. You was taught. Because what? How you going to direct anybody in the church when you don't even know yourself?

Shane Watson:

So we spoke about the church. Now we're going to go back to school.

Sonja Wyatt:

Okay.

Shane Watson:

You went to Lincoln when it was segregated. Outside of school did you guys ever interact with the white students at all?

Sonja Wyatt:

No.

Shane Watson:

Okay. Was that looked down upon, or just something you took upon yourselves because you didn't think it would be a positive situation?

Sonja Wyatt: Back then the white went to their school, the black went to their school. When we got segregated, it was because we had to. If we hadn't had to be segregated, I probably think black would have still going to black school. We got segregated in '66, we did.

[0:08:01.0] That was my last year at Lincoln High School.

Shane Watson: Okay, and outside of the school was it just the school that was segregated, or were there establishments outside of school that practiced the same thing?

Sonja Wyatt: Outside was segregated. But we went to the picture show, we had to go in the back door. Same way with the restaurant. Anything that we done we had to go in the back. We wasn't allowed in the front. So I tell these kids now, y'all got a privilege. Y'all riding off somebody else's back that have paved the way for you and y'all don't understand this.

You know, we couldn't do – we had to take due as we done, you know. We didn't know what it was, you know, about going to the picture show because when we went to the picture show, you had to go in the back door, and sit in the back. You wasn't allowed in the front. That's the way it was.

You know, some of us was so poor we didn't have picture show money.

[0:09:00.0] We had to stay at home and play with neighbors. These kids have got it good. I remember we didn't even have a T.V. We didn't get a T.V. 'til I was like twelve. Here now you've got a T.V. in every room. We wasn't privileged to that.

I remember we was so poor that I had two pairs of shoes. A Sunday pair and a school pair. And one coat. I didn't have the clothes that these kids got now. That you can change and put on whatever you want, and sometimes you don't know what you want because you've got so much. We didn't have privilege. What you wore to school that day, you came home and pulled it off, and put it up. You might didn't wear it the next day, but the day after you wore it back to school.

We had choices to do. We didn't have running water in our house. You had to pump water and tote it. Same —

[0:10:00.0] way about your bath. We didn't have tubs in the house. We had number two tubs that you had to heat your water on the stove. Back then you used wood stoves. Coal. So you know, y'all are blessed. And we got out of school to pick cotton, to chop cotton, and to pull cotton. I have worked from 6:00 to 6:00 for \$5 chopping cotton. Now y'all haven't even experienced that. \$2 per 100 picking cotton. None of y'all have experienced that.

Break down the history. We have come a long way, and throwing it away. Young people is riding off the older people's back, and don't realize it. But see, they've got to realize you're fixing to be a generation that's going to have another generation coming up under you. And —

[0:11:00.2] what are you paving for them to look forward to?

Shane Watson: That's very powerful. Honestly. Just to say that you guys had to pick cotton. Would you say that that was a big part of the community that a lot of people had to pick cotton?

Sonja Wyatt: Oh, yes. That's where we got our money from. The guys, they drove tractors, you know, who had fathers. I'm a single-parent's mother. My father and mother wasn't together. My father left my mother when my sister was in my momma's womb, but she took care of us. We stayed in a two-room house, six people, and we got along. Now we can't even stay in a four-room house and get along with six people. But back then we did.

And we ate whatever we could get. We didn't have a choice that I don't want this, I don't want that. Whatever momma put on the table, that's what you ate. And if you —

[0:12:00.3] didn't want it, you went to bed hungry. Now the next morning you were glad to get them biscuits that you didn't want last night. You know what I'm talking about? So God has been good to us, and we have been blessed.

This young generation – and it's going to get worse, because each generation is going to get what? Weaker. The Bible speaks to that. But we need to know where we come from, and how we should be thankful and grateful what we got now. Because we didn't use to have this here. If I had the privilege that y'all got, I'd be tickled and thrilled to death. When I chopped cotton, picked cotton, I didn't see my money. Momma got my money. Granny got my money. And used it. But it was a good cause. Because

what? When wintertime comes I couldn't work, who was going to feed me and take care of me?

[0:13:01.0]

Nowadays kids work. I ain't giving you my money. You're sleeping in my bed. You're putting your feet up on my table. Who's going to feed you this winter once your check is gone all this summer? Who's going to feed you?

They bought me clothes to put on my back, and I never missed a meal. I might didn't like what I ate, but I'm here. We didn't have this – we was grateful. We was grateful. We was kids that were grateful. You didn't have anything, but what you had you took care of it.

Like for instance, I could speak about my family today. You go and buy these kids all this stuff and they don't even appreciate it. At Christmas time you go and buy them all these bicycles. When you look up, they're laying in somebody's ditch. We couldn't even afford a bicycle.

[0:14:00.0]

But now kids got bicycles. They done left their bicycles and gone to cars now. I didn't know what a car was 'til I got grown. My own job. My own house. That was my first car. Nowadays kids get a car when they get in the ninth grade. We didn't have that. So I say y'all got a privilege. A good privilege.

Shane Watson:

Okay. Speaking of how privileged kids are today in this generation, is there any advice that you would have for our generation and the generation coming after us?

Sonja Wyatt:

I would say to this generation coming now get closer to God, be obedient, and appreciate what you have and make sure that you have a good attitude.

[0:15:00.4]

You can be the nicest looking person in the world and have all the money, but if you've got a nasty attitude, it would not get you nowhere. And we've got some kids who's got some nasty attitudes. To make it through this life we're going to have to change. And the change that's going to have to come through us is coming together. Being as one, not singular. Because together we stand, divided we will fall. And that's what we're doing. We're falling. We're letting kids rapid run loose.

See, we couldn't run loose like that. When I was coming up, you didn't hear jailhouse running over. You didn't hear jailhouse running. Because you wouldn't dare do the things that kids are

doing now. I know things change. You don't stay in the old modern ways, but —

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the world goes around. The world is round. And you've got to realize what goes around comes back around. I don't care who you are, what you got. White, black, blue, or green. We all the same in God's eyesight.

I might have a penny more than you have, but when you hurt, I'm suppose to hurt. That's what you call love. Not lip – love. Because when you're down, I'm down. When you're up, I'm supposed to be up. But it don't work like that. I got it. You get it the best way you can. We didn't have that attitude when we was coming up. So like I said about this generation. If we don't catch this generation, it's going to be lost and the next generation that comes behind it won't even make it.

Shane Watson:

Okay. We're going to switch gears a little bit and talk more about your personal life. So what is your occupation?

[0:17:00.0]

Sonja Wyatt:

My occupation, I worked at Goodyear doing tires. I worked there at Goodyear, I did.

Shane Watson:

Okay, were there any factors that influenced your decision to take on this role?

Sonja Wyatt:

No, but I always had a mind that I want to do better. And I tell any young person you crawl before you walk. But when you start walking, you're supposed to do better. And you're always looking – looking to move forward. Not to go backwards, but move forward. So that's what I did. I looked forward to do what I want to do. You know, you're going to have people tell you well, you can't do this here. Yes, I can. Because I had people tell me, you won't go there. Yes, I did. I was the first woman to walk in Goodyear in 1970. I can tell you. 1972 I went to Goodyear, May 1st.

[0:18:00.0]

I can remember just as good. My clock card number was 3245. But I had people say you would not make it. So don't let nobody tell you what you can't do, because you can do anything with Christ who's strengthening you.

So like I say, yeah, I had good jobs. But you know, I had motivated myself. You've got to have that motivating yourself. I

can tell you I want you to go reach the moon, but if you don't want to go reach that moon, you're not going to go.

Shane Watson: Being the first woman at Goodyear had to be a little bit difficult. Did you face any kind of backlash or problems working with all men?

Sonja Wyatt: I can't say I did because it was other black men in there, and they treated me just like I was I guess a big sister. They took care of me. And —

[0:19:00.0] bad to say, me and Jesus and that old pistol, we went in there every night because I said hey, I'm in here with all these men. Anything could happen.

And I know one night I had an experience. I had it in my pocketbook and a supervisor comes by and somebody had seen that I was trimming vents, and somebody come by and seen it, so he went and told the supervisor. So he come up there. He said Ms. Wyatt, you got a gun in your pocketbook? I said sure! I said, do you think I would be in here with over 800 men and I'm the only woman here? Are you crazy? He said well, I tell you what you do. He said you put it up in your locker. I said no, I don't think so. My locker's too far. Something go down, I want to be where I can get it. So after then they all called me Aunt Okie. Then later on in the years other ladies came in.

Shane Watson: Okay. And were you like a big sister to them, that showed them the ropes of what to do while they're at Goodyear?

Sonja Wyatt: Yes. Yes. It was a team, it was. You worked as a team.

[0:20:00.7]

Shane Watson: Okay. Looking over your life from early childhood up to this moment, how would you say Lake County has changed or has not changed? And if you've already answered that question or feel like you might have, we can skip over it.

Sonja Wyatt: Lake County has changed a little. Not that much. And how you can change, you've got to have a vision. And you've got to have a dream. If you don't have a vision and a dream, you will do what? You will die. And that's what happened to Lake County. Everybody has left Lake County. Lake County used to be full of people. Lake County used to be popular. Lake County used to

have jobs. But you can't find a job here now. People working now has got to go twenty-five, thirty miles to get a job.

It's sad to say, but I've seen a time that —

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they had factories here, but they don't have sewing factories anymore. I seen the time that you could make a living on a farm doing farm work. They don't have that anymore because your farm work now, the equipment they're making now, you ain't got to have man to do it. You ain't got to have a man to drive a tractor. They fixed them where tractors drive by their self. You stand down on the end working it.

So Lake County have you know, just went down. And you've got to have people in your town and in the system that have a vision and a dream that we want this to be a better town to live in. And that comes through your Mayor, your alderman. They ought to be want-to to bring something in here.

[0:22:02.1]

To make people to be proud of Lake County. I'm proud of Lake County. We don't have that much, but what little we do have, I'm proud of it. But we could have more.

Shane Watson:

So outside of the technology that works with farming equipment, is there any other reason that you know of why the economic situation of Lake County has gone down in the past years?

Sonja Wyatt:

It's because a lack of us don't step out. We could have these jobs if we step out. Our problem is oh, they're not going to give me that job. You don't know 'til you try. It's just like that courthouse over there. It's not nary a black in the courthouse. It's not their fault. It's our fault. You've got to make the first step. Ain't nobody going to give you anything. Just like this place here. No black.

[0:23:00.0]

Now you've got black on the city digging ditches, but you don't have none in office. It's not their fault. It's our fault. You don't have no black in the bank. It's not their fault. It's our fault.

Every time we don't push the issue that hey, I can do just as well as she, or maybe even better. Because God gave me a mind, a head to think and do. And I can do the same thing. But we don't, we don't. We act like we're scared or something. Scared to step out on faith. We are. The door is open, but we're letting it close.

Yeah, they'll let you have them old nasty jobs digging ditches. You want a job that you can go in from 9:00 to 5:00 with your suit and tie on, and come home. You deserve it. You done went to school. You got your education.

[0:24:00.1]

Why should you have to dig ditches? Why should you have to drive a tractor? Why you can't sit behind a desk? Why you can't be a boss over somebody?

You know, don't put me on a back burner. Put me on the front burner. Like I tell people, the door is open. God done opened the door. We just ain't walking in. We're standing back. Can we go in? You can go in now. You've got all that privilege. You can go in. You're not going in the back door like I did. You've got the privilege to walk in the front door and to demand, hey, I want this job.

And around here, a job like the courthouse and here, you don't know nothing about it 'til they done filled it. It's too late. That's something we need to work on. Any public job should be published in the paper to let you know. You're not suppose to get it through word of mouth. It's suppose to be published that hey, there's a job open.

[0:25:00.0]

You know, we holler about well, you're not qualified. Tell me who is qualified. Every job any of us has ever had somebody else to what? Train us. You didn't know about that job 'til you walked in there. And you didn't know what to do when you walked in that job. I'll tell anybody. Any job you go to, somebody is going to have to train you. And whoever trains you, somebody trained them.

Shane Watson:

Okay, so just to summarize what you just stated, you would say that if you could change anything it would be to have more black people in office, and also to better publicize the jobs that are available within the offices of Lake County.

Sonja Wyatt:

Yes.

Shane Watson:

Okay. And we're going to have one serious question for you.

Sonja Wyatt:

Okay.

Shane Watson:

Well, not that serious, but as an organization Crossroads to Freedom focuses on assets-based community development, meaning that we focus on the institutions, ideals, and organizations

that bring value to the communities. In your opinion, what are some of the greatest assets to Lake County?

[0:26:00.2]

Sonja Wyatt: Now you did ask me that question, didn't you. Go back over it again.

Shane Watson: What are some of the – in your opinion, what are some of the greatest assets in Lake County? Like organizations, buildings, people, that are of value to you in Lake County.

Sonja Wyatt: Well, we don't have too many. We don't have too many. We don't. And the reason I say that, I go back, we're not concerned about each other. When we get concerned about each other, we would do for each other.

[0:27:00.1]

Shane Watson: Seeing that you grew up in Lake County with others out here, are there certain things that kept you here, or is it just your love for Lake County?

Sonja Wyatt: I never wanted to go nowhere else. I've been different places, stayed different places, but I always just want to stay here. I never wanted to be in a big city because so much goes on in a big city, and it began to happen at our back door now. We used to didn't say that, but crimes and everything is happening in the little city as well as the big city. But I had no desire to go nowhere.

And I could have. I could have you know, moved, but like I said, my life, I have enjoyed my life. I have went places that I always wanted to go, and still going. Still going. Nothing happened. The Lord blessed me on October 18th. I am a real proud mother to know that my son's going to be put in the Hall of Fame up in Champaign.

[0:28:00.0]

And like I say, I have three kids. They're not the best of kids, but God has blessed me. I've never had to go to the courthouse or jailhouse with none of them. Two of them got pretty good jobs. My daughter, baby girl, she's a dentist's assistant. My son, he works with underprivileged children, and he's a basketball coach. Also, he played professional basketball over in Finland. The year he come out of college from New Mexico the strike was on here in the United States so he had to go to Finland. So I've been well

blessed. I have. So I don't have any shame or nothing to be sad about. I'm well blessed. Still being blessed.

Shane Watson: Okay, we're going to come back to your children, but I have one more question for you.

Sonja Wyatt: Okay.

Shane Watson: If you could describe Lake County in one word, what would it be and why?

Sonja Wyatt: In one word Lake County needs —

[0:29:00.4] to go on a move. We need to start moving. We have staggered. We are going to be on the move. We got this river port that's coming through, and people are going to come back to Lake County. But Lake County's going to have to do something for their self. And Lake County is going to have to be able to accommodate the people that's going to move in. We're going to have to have a decent school, because everybody come — any time you go in, the first thing, the two things they ask you, about your schooling and about your churches. They're the first two things they ask when they move in a community. How's your churches, and how are your schools?

Shane Watson: Okay. Can you expand on what the new port is about?

Sonja Wyatt: The river port is like hauling your grains and stuff up and down —

[0:30:00.1] that haul our merchandise, but this here is going to be on the river hauling stuff in.

Shane Watson: Okay. So that should bring in a lot of business.

Sonja Wyatt: That should bring a lot of business. It's going to be on the move.

Shane Watson: Okay. And going back to your kids. You said one of your sons will be in the Hall of Fame as of October 18th in Champaign.

Sonja Wyatt: Um-hmm.

Shane Watson: And that's Champaign, Illinois?

Sonja Wyatt: Um-hmm.

Shane Watson: And what is the reason he'll be in the Hall of Fame?

Sonja Wyatt: Basketball.

Shane Watson: U of I? University of Illinois?

Sonja Wyatt: No. He played for New Mexico. He went to _____. He's in the Hall of Fame already in Springfield, Illinois. But Champaign, the headquarters down there, they picked out twelve players to put in Champaign of Hall of Fame, and he was one of them.

Shane Watson: If you could bring —

[0:31:00.1] any tradition back today to Lake County what tradition would it be?

Sonja Wyatt: Jobs. More love. More concern.

Shane Watson: We've talked about a lot. We talked about your life, talked about your kids, about Lake County and what you think needs to be changed in Lake County. Besides those things, is there anything else that you'd like to add that we did not talk about?

Sonja Wyatt: No.

Shane Watson: All right, well we want to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom project, and we have enjoyed learning about your stories today.

Sonja Wyatt: Appreciate it.

[End of Audio]