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Macie Roberson, 2014

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Interviewer: Good after noon. Today is June 19th, and on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rose College, and Teams for Success, we'd like to thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. My name is Shane Watson. Today's interview will be archived only at Crossroads of Freedom's website, and we'd like to start with some basic background information like starting with your name.

Macie Roberson: Macie Roberson.

Interviewer: And if you don't mind, can you tell us what year you were born?

Macie Roberson: Born in 1944.

Interviewer: Were you born and raised in Lake County?

Macie Roberson: I was born and raised in Lake County.

Interviewer: What was it like growing up in Lake County?

Macie Roberson: It was tough. Growing up in Lake County, basically my mother died when I was nine months old, and I was raised by my grandmother and granddaddy. So they were both grandmother and granddaddy, and mother and daddy also. So like –

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Macie Roberson: -- was hard in the latter '40s, and I started school in 1950 to grammar school. Back then you didn't have preschool, and you didn't have kindergarten. So it was a different world than it is today.

Interviewer: I'm sorry to hear about your mother. So must've been really special to be able to raise your own kids correct?

Macie Roberson: Pardon?

Interviewer: It must've been really special to raise your own kids.

Macie Roberson: Right.

Interviewer: You raised them in Lake County as well?

Macie Roberson: In Lake County. Actually I have an extended family. I have one daughter, and my first wife died in 1995 of cancer, and I lived alone from '95 to '99, and I married this lady from Dyersburg, and she had three children, which all of our children were grown. Our children are a lot older than you are now, and back to business, my granddaughter is having a baby –

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Macie Roberson: -- probably as we speak. So life has really, really changed over the years.

Interviewer: Well congratulations on the soon to be great grandson or daughter.

Macie Roberson: Right, thank you.

Interviewer: You're welcome. So we're going to talk about your childhood, and who you looked up to. Did you have any role models when you were growing up?

Macie Roberson: Yeah basically I started kind of being involved in politics when I was about nine years old. I worked on a farm, started chopping cotton when I was eight or nine years old. I wasn't big enough or old enough to make a full day chopping cotton, so I'd chop a quarter of a day in the morning, and a quarter of a day in the evening to make a half a day. Then the next year or so I started making a full day, but the gentlemen that owned the farm that I worked for was a state representative. A big man, --

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Macie Roberson: -- Damon Rivers Headen. He was state representative, and back then this was probably 1955, probably I was 11 years old then, and back then when you went to vote, you didn't have anything like it is today. You had a paper ballot, and you had to take a lead pencil and mark that ballot. Well Mr. Headen would buy these pencils by

the boxes, by the gross, and I had to take and sharpen those pencils with a manual sharpener, and what one of my jobs was on election day was stood outside, and handed out these pencils that his name was on them to go into the polls. So that was my first relation or first involvement in politics. From then, I went to school. I was a student body president from several class presidents –

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Macie Roberson: -- and everything, so I've always been interested at a low key in politics.

Interviewer: Okay that's really interesting story, and had to sharpen pencils and hand them out. So you said you sharpen about 100 pencils every day for the voters?

Macie Roberson: No, more than that. I sharpen pencils, they come in a gross, in a box, 144, and he'd get them by cases. So when it come election time I'd spend two or three weeks, just sharpening pencils. Like a pencil sharpener like the old wooden kind that you turn was on the wall, and I'd have blisters on my fingers and everything sharpening so many pencils. It was different. You didn't have any advertisements like you had today. You had little placard that were about 8 or 12 by 12 or something, and you'd go around the county, and you would staple them to the electric poles. It was legal back then. Now it's not legal to do. So that's the way politics was back in the '50s.

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Interviewer: I'm guessing you'd say politics have changed a lot since you have become mayor of Lake County.

Macie Roberson: Everything has changed. When I became mayor, I've been mayor of Lake County 20 years. When I was elected mayor of Lake County we were not on a computer system at the court house. So within two years I was able to get everything changed over to computers, and that's the first big change in the county as far as I'd say the modernization of the system.

Interviewer:

Macie Roberson: That's the first one in the city. Quite a change, but your notice the reason for that is this highway that goes from –

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Macie Roberson: -- that point to the new port, the Port of Cates Landing. That highway that goes from there to Port of Cates Landing is a \$21 million dollar project, and it was mostly secured by U.S. Congressman back then, John Tanner. So when they get it completed it will be a super two lane highway.

Interviewer: Will that be the first two lane highway in the city?

Macie Roberson: First super two lanes, yes.

Interviewer: Speaking of the river port, I've heard a lot about it recently, and a lot of people we've interviewed have said that community members have to leave the area to go find a job. Do you think the river port will be able to provide jobs for the community members of Lake County?

Macie Roberson: Sure, the port in itself does not provide a lot of jobs, because a port just loads, unloads, and off loads off –

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Macie Roberson: -- of barges. So it's limited. You'll have operators. You'll have people, but I mean if you get up to working in the port, if you get to working 25, 30, 40 people it will probably be a big thing, but that's not the idea. The idea is the port brings industry, because industry wants to come but where they can use the port and this port is a slack water port. First thing, it's built above the 500 year flood plain. Do you know what that is? Lake County is protected, we've got 21 miles or 22 miles of levy systems. The Mississippi river is only two miles from where we're sitting. So we've got a levy that protects the whole county. The port is built higher than that levy, so even in a the great flood of 2011 this port would still have been out of water, and we have a 350 –

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Macie Roberson: -- acre industrial park that is just across the road from the port, and it's above the 100 year flood plain, which is very, very unique. This port is what we call a slack water port. The slack water I mean is a 9,000 foot port, other words, it's like the channel of the river goes straight down towards Memphis. This is just like an artery that comes off up to the port. Boats that have tows, and they want to unload something there, they can cut one loose, and then bring it up in there, and unload it or load it, and that's what a port is for. Another big thing, we have a designation of being a free trade zone, or a foreign trade zone. What a foreign trade zone does, is it lets industry import things from the Far East, and everything, or South America.

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Macie Roberson: -- without paying the tariffs. If they were to come into some of the other places they would have to pay a tariff. So this is an incentive for them to use our port.

Interviewer: That's really interesting. You said it's not the port that brings the jobs, it'd be the industry.

Macie Roberson: Right.

Interviewer: What types of industries do you guys expect to be using the port?

Macie Roberson: We're working on a prospect now, the first one, and it's a big project for us, and it's agricultural. I can't tell you what, but it's agricultural, which see where the port is located, the next place up above us is Cairo, Illinois, and Cairo is where the Mississippi and Ohio come together. So things can be shipped up through the Ohio, or the Mississippi river, either one. So it's strategically located to the advantage of everyone.

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Macie Roberson: I want to tell you something else that was unique to me about the port. Within 150 miles of this port it touches 7 states. That's very unique. When we did a survey, and we're still doing surveys, but 150 mile radius you can touch about 50 percent of the United States. So it's just the federal government has invested so much money, the state government has invested so much money, and the local government has. With the port and the highway, we have about \$51 million dollars invested in this port and highway, and the highway just was built for the port too.

Interviewer: So with 150 mile radius, usually that should definitely be shoe in for industry to just want to come –

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Interviewer: --into the port, and that will be a lot of big business for the area. So speaking of that, and what it could bring, what do you say will be the new vision for Lake County?

Macie Roberson: Well the new vision and these are things that just not happened you know just over time; like we've been working in making a request for information to this company. We've been working on that a couple of weeks, and still supplying them information, they're supplying us information. Not in every industry that wants to come do you want in your locality. There might be some dangers. There might be some concerns, and you got to weigh what is best for your community, what's best in the matter of jobs. It's just a whole lot of things to consider when you're looking for industry.

Interviewer: I definitely figure that would be a lot to consider.

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Interviewer: So we're going to go back a little bit. You mentioned the stop light being a change and the river port is bringing a change, and you bringing a change during your first two years in tenure of changing everything to computerized systems. What would you say has been the biggest change that's happened to Lake County since you've been mayor?

Macie Roberson: The biggest change is really hard to say, but the biggest change, see what is happening in the state of Tennessee is there's a movement for the population to move from west Tennessee toward middle Tennessee, and that's because they have industry. Now we've been very fortunate that we haven't lost much population. By much, I'm just talking about a small amount, and anytime we weigh the financial conditions and economic conditions of our country have been over the last –

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Macie Roberson: -- few years. If you can keep everything about stable you're doing real good, and another thing is we've tried to manage our finances as best we can, and for a small county, and even if you look at the dynamics, and also look at the financial condition of other counties around, I feel good that we've maintained where we are. A lot of places like Obion County, which is east of us and Dyer County, they've lost so many of their big factories, and if you have something that employees say like 1,000 people, that plant gets up and moves, look what you've lost. I'd rather have two or three small ones that employed 200 people than to have 1 big one that employs 1,000 people. The reason I say that, if the –

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Macie Roberson: -- 1,000 is going to kill you. If you lose one of these 200 it's not going to hurt you as bad as the big one.

Interviewer: That's very important to keep the companies small so you continue to have a good workforce here. Speaking of workforce, a lot of students will be coming out of high school, and they'll be looking to either go to college, or get into the workforce. What advice would you have for the youth of the community of Lake County?

Macie Roberson: For the community of Lake County, I think one of the biggest things that have come to pass in the last year in the state of Tennessee is the governor's Tennessee promise. Do you know what the Tennessee promise is? Tennessee promise is every senior that graduates starting this next year can go to a junior college or a technology school without paying a dime. Everyone, and now you

always think about something new there has to be a catch to it.
Well if you go to a junior college you have to keep a 2.0 –

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Macie Roberson: --average, but you know they need to keep a 2.0, but if not that they can go to a technology school, and that is a great thing. Then when these companies come, they want to know what kind of training abilities and everything you have. Okay, we have Dyersburg State, which is a two year college. We've got a vo-tech school at Newbern, and we got Jackson State at Jackson. We've got all these training places that are within a 25, 30, to 75 miles. So we feel like we have a lot to offer that way.

Interviewer: So your advice would be to definitely get an education, and take advantage what the Tennessee governor has put on the table.

Macie Roberson: That's exactly right.

Interviewer: I would definitely consider that an asset to the community –

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Interviewer: -- to be able to go to school for free for up to two years, or for the technology school, and as an organization, Crossroads of Freedom focuses on assets based community development, meaning that we focus on institutions ideals and organizations that bring values to the communities. We've spoken about the river port, and the new scholarships for students to go to school, in your opinion what are some other great assets that Lake County has to offer?

Macie Roberson: You know one of the big things that we that have grown up here, I don't think we appreciate Lake County as we should. People that come in from bigger cities, bigger towns, everybody is looking to make money, but at the same time there's a quality of life. Okay we can go to Dyersburg, it's 25 miles away, or we can go to Union City, and we can have some of the things that you know, cultural things, --

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Macie Roberson: -- but Lake County is kind of more laid back. You know one of the basic things that I tell people, let's see, I did an interview with 60 minutes one time and 20/20 also, I live out towards the lake. I can stand in my backyard or front yard. I can look every morning when I get up, and I can see the sun come up over Reelfoot Lake, one of the most beautiful places in the world. A lake that was created by an earthquake, naturally created, but that afternoon I can look, and I can see the sun go down over the Mississippi river. No other place in the world can boast and say things like this. We have so many people that like the recreational things, like the fishing, the hunting, we got the river, the lake, and one of the big things here is the bird watching.

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Macie Roberson: We have the eagles that are magnificent. Things like this that I don't think we take into account when we're talking about life. Life is more than, I know like we said we all have to make a living, but still there's life, and there's life for our kids and everything that we bring up.

Interviewer: Right, those are definitely big assets of the community.

Macie Roberson: We have a good church base. The thing about it is we have the church base, but we just don't have the people to go. Sorry about that, but that's just the way it is, but we do have active churches.

Interviewer: So speaking of church actually, did you attend church as a child here?

Macie Roberson: Sure, well within the county. I'll put it that way.

Interviewer: What did that church community mean to you as a child and to your family?

Macie Roberson: You know I believe in church. I believe in God. The first thing I do every morning when I put my foot –

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Macie Roberson: -- on the floor is thank God that I'm alive, and everything he does for me, but you know at night when I pillow my head I'm so thankful. So thankful for all his creation for everything that he does, because without God we're nothing.

Interviewer: Definitely, definitely. We're going to go to another asset that we've noticed while being in the community this week, is the work program that you guys have for the prisoners that allows them to work in the community. Can you expand on that, and what that means, and what that does for them?

Macie Roberson: You know about the size of the institution? The institution up here as 22 to 2300 inmates. They employ about 620 people. Of that 620 people 43 percent of those are from Lake County. The other drive in –

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Macie Roberson: -- from other counties, actually a few from Kentucky, and places like that. We have one or two from Shelby County that work at the prison, but they're base is real good. They do a lot of community work, and not only does it, you know I think when these people are in the institution, them to get out, them to work know that they're helping the locality where they are, or helping people they go out and work for the cities, the towns, the churches, and things like this. They know they're giving back, and I think it's very good for the inmates also.

Interviewer: I would definitely agree with you. One serious question that we've asked everybody, is been serious for some, it's been a little bit easier for other people, and we've asked them if they could describe Lake County in one word what would it be and why?

Macie Roberson: I'd have to say it's beautiful, because –

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Macie Roberson: -- of things that I've said about the lake, the river. I love to hunt. I love to fish, and to me I think we just see the crops that are

growing, the green, we can see trees. Other states you can go, and you can drive without seeing trees, without seeing the grass, and we're blessed. We're just blessed.

Interviewer: You guys do have a very interesting landscape to definitely be able to see a lake, trees, and the fields of grain, and we've talked about your tenure as mayor, the changes that have occurred during your tenure as mayor, the new river port, and how good the community is here speaking of churches and the school systems, and the governor's new scholarship program. Thinking of all these things, is there anything else you would like to add to this interview before we conclude it?

Macie Roberson: Well you know the big thing is we have a community –

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Macie Roberson: -- that for the most works together, and you've got to have people working together to accomplish things. And not only things right now are not only in county. Things are just about regional now. So you not only have people to work within our county, within our joining counties, within west Tennessee, and within the state, and when you have people working together you can accomplish things. You know the division in this country is probably caused by people that have a lot of selfish interest, and you can't get anything done when it's I or my. I or my can't do anything. It's has to be we.

Interviewer: That is definitely true. We want to thank you for participating in the Crossroads of Freedom project, and we've definitely enjoyed learning more about Lake County, and your story as well.

Macie Roberson: Thank you for having me.

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