Fred Morton, 2013

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Brittany Looney: Hello, my name is Brittany Looney.

Diana Lemus: And my name is Diana Lemus.

Brittany Looney: And on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom and the Center for Transforming Communities, we'd like to thank you for speaking with us today. Could you please state your name?

Fred Morton: My name is Fred Morton.

Diana Lemus: What year were you born?

Fred Morton: I was born in 1940.

Diana Lemus: Can you tell us where were you born and raised?

Fred Morton: I was born and raised in this immediate community here. I was born at Methodist Hospital, spent all, the first 18 years of my life, living within 7 blocks of this very location at Summer and Highland.

Brittany Looney: And what was your home life like growing up?

Fred Morton: It was sorta like "Leave it to Beaver". I had an older brother. We had a dog. We lived in a nice little house and that was in 1946, until I left home to go off to college. But during the war years, like many families, we kinda moved around

[0:01:00] from house to house, sharing houses with other, with folks who had their own house or apartment or whatever.

Brittany Looney: And while you were living in this neighborhood, what school did you attend?

Fred Morton: I attended Treadwell all 12 years.

Diana Lemus: What kinds of activities were you involved in?

Fred Morton: Well, when I was in elementary school, some of the main things that we did, we went to the, there's a parks, a public parks at the school during the summer, so we all went to the park during the summer. During the year, well, we would, you know, the various school activities, playing baseball, softball, sandlot football, and those kinds of things and then by the time I was nine years old, I

was in the scouts and remained in scouts until I finished high school, boy scouts.

Brittany Looney: Could you tell us what Treadwell was like at the time that you attended the school?

[0:02:00]

Fred Morton: Well, it was a wonderful school. As I said, there were 12 years, and so you'd start in the first grade and you could go all the way to the 12th grade, and they were, of the 300-some-odd students that graduated in my class at Treadwell in '58, probably about a fourth went there all 12 years. But it was a nice school. This was a working-class neighborhood. Nobody had a lot of money, a lot of wealth, and that sort of thing. Not highly educated, but we all took school very seriously. We took our athletic teams very seriously, all the sports, baseball basketball, football, we were all very supportive of that. We had a theater here in the community, on Summer Avenue, a movie theater, and then there was a YMCA, and eventually, we had a swimming pool at the YMCA and then further on down Macon at Gaisman Park, so we had a lot of things here in the immediate community, but then there are also the things available in the larger community – the zoo, and things like that.

Brittany Looney: Would you say that this was one of the more

[0:03:00] flourishing neighborhoods at the time or it was sort of like – was it sort of cookie-cutter type neighborhood or –

Fred Morton: It was a little bit of both. Many of the houses that were built in Highland Heights community, initially in the early part of the century, were perhaps larger. There were a few, you know, very nice homes of wealthier people that lived here, but the first homes that were built in the immediate community were very similar in structure, sort of a three-bedroom, one bath and a kitchen type thing. And then after World War II, well there were a lot of cookie-cutter subdivisions were built further out east in the neighborhood. So it was a combination of some older houses as well as newer houses.

Brittany Looney: Could you tell us how – well, I guess the median income of the families that were living here?

Fred Morton: Uh well –

Brittany Looney: Or specifically

[0:04:00] your family, if you

Fred Morton: Yeah, well, we – as I said, you know, we were all folks from working-class families. Very few of the mothers worked until the children got older into high school, but predominantly, single working parent in each family. Many of the jobs were at some of the factories in North Memphis or throughout the Memphis area. International Harvester, DuPont, Firestone, some of those – and then a lot of people did public work, as I say, worked in grocery stores, department stores, or downtown and that sort of thing. But growing up, I don't remember ever really knowing very many professional people, maybe one or two physicians that lived in the community. Didn't know what an attorney was or CPA. They may have been around but we didn't know it. But we were all from, kinda, working-class families.

Brittany Looney: So you would say not many went to college or – the parent-wise?

[0:05:00]

Fred Morton: No, parent-wise, no. The typical thing was that most of the parents hardly had finished more than junior high school. Like my parents, my mother's family, moved here from Northwest Tennessee in the 1920s. My father moved here, or came to Memphis in the 1930s during the Depression era and so a lot of those folks kinda came out of the rural, surrounding area that during the '30s was very depressed and so they came to Memphis to find jobs and things like that. And many of them had just come out, you know, had barely more than perhaps an elementary education or something beyond that.

My father happened to finish high school, but that was pretty rare for young men who were coming to maturity back in the mid-, late '30s.

Brittany Looney: So comparing the neighborhood now to then, you said that the parent, well the family, the households

[0:06:00] were mostly working-class.

Fred Morton: Mm-hmm.

Brittany Looney: And I would assume now that it is still working-class. How do you think it was able to work then as opposed to now? How do you

think the neighborhood was able to flourish then, as opposed to now?

Fred Morton: Yeah. Well, a number of things have happened over the intervening last 50, 60 years. When I was growing up in the neighborhood, probably a majority of families owned their own homes. There was a significant number that rented, but a majority of persons owned their own homes. Many were veterans coming out of World War II. They used the GI Bill to purchase their house and that sort of thing, and so back then, many of the people, you know, owned their own homes and during the '50s and '60s, the thing that was expected was that you'd finish high school and then you would go on to college or you'd get a job or enter the service, something like that, to sort of – to make a better life.

[0:07:00] The goal of nearly all of the parents was that we want our children to have a better future, to have more education and a better income than we did and many of those parents came out of the very tough Depression years, where things were so difficult and so the parents were almost, sort of, united in wanting their children to have an easier time in life and not to go through the kinda privation and hardships that many of them went through in the 1930s.

Diana Lemus: What are some of your dearest memories at ____?

Fred Morton: The dearest memories I had of what, of this area?

Diana Lemus: Of Treadwell.

Fred Morton: Of Treadwell? Oh, gosh. Just having a great time. It was a wonderful place to grow up in. We had great teachers. The whole notion that the whole world is out there, you know, waiting for us and all you needed to do was to study hard and work hard and, you know, the world was kind of inviting you to jump in and have a good time in life. And that was sort of the attitude that we had back in the '50s.

[0:08:00] As I say, we had some great teachers. We had very successful athletic teams that competed, you know, throughout the city and so there was a good spirit about all of that and it was in this neighborhood that I met the young lady that I married and we stayed married for almost 50 years, so I've got a lot of really very fond memories of this neighborhood.

Brittany Looney: You said that you met your wife at Treadwell, correct?

Fred Morton: Correct, yeah.

Brittany Looney: Could you tell us the story of how you, I guess, courted –

[Laughter] - your wife?

Fred Morton: Well, yeah, it's very interesting world. The irony of that was that she was a member of the Baptist church and I was a member of the Methodist church and we Methodists, we would have dances. We would, you know, there was no problem. But the Baptists, they couldn't dance and so the story was that the girls that some of us dated from the Baptist church, they would come over to the Methodist church 'cause we had more interesting parties. But I met my wife.

[0:09:00] We had our first date when she asked me to come to a Rainbow Girls Dance, which is up here at the Masonic Lodge, which is just right there behind the fire station now. And we had our first date in the fall of 1955 and stayed, you know, we were boyfriend/girlfriend until we got married when I was in college.

Brittany Looney: Oh, so she pursued you?

Fred Morton: Well, we pursued each other.

[Laughter]

Brittany Looney: Could you tell us more about your – well, the same is true, were your memories about the neighborhood or more so the block that you lived on?

Fred Morton: Well, I lived, actually the house were we lived on when I was in the first grade was only three blocks from Treadwell. It was at the corner of National and Lamphier and, you know, just a beautiful area. Not all of the neighborhood was developed then. There were a lot of big fields and a lot of construction going on, so we had a lot of fields that we could play in, ride our bikes in. The drainage ditch at that particular time was not covered over

[0:10:00] so we spent a lot of time playing in the ditch and that sort of thing. So we had a grand time kinda playing in the neighborhood, riding our bikes and all of that and going up into junior high school, played little league ball and that sort of thing, so it was a great place to grow up in and to have a good time. We had the swimming pool over at fairgrounds that we would go to and then there were several other, there's private swimming pools, all of

which were available to Caucasians. But at that particular time during the '50s, of course, it was a segregated community and I know I've told this story many times that, that growing up, I never looked an African-American young person in the eye until I was a freshman in college and I went to the school in the east. So we were, our community was just, as young people, we were just totally segregated. The only African-Americans that we ever saw were the domestics that worked in our homes or my grandfather had a

[0:11:00] barber shop and he had a young man who was his shoeshine boy – that's the way you called, shoeshine boy, which is terrible but Sorghum was his name and I met, but those are the only African-Americans that I saw growing up, and as I said, I didn't see a, didn't look an African-American young person in the eye until I was a freshman in college.

Diana Lemus: How were you involved in the neighborhood – then and now?

Fred Morton: Well, my main involvement in the neighborhood then was just, you know, being in school and I was an officer in the student government in school and involved in a lot of those kinda activities, which was really nice. Parenthetically, I was head of the student government in the year 1957 and '58 and that was the very year that Little Rock Central was integrated and I guess many of you know that story, but I remember my mother taking me aside in the summer of 1957 and she said, "Freddy,"

[0:12:00] that's what I was known then, she said, "Freddy, now you as a leader of student government need to be aware that this thing, you know, it may come down to they may do this, they may have integration at your school and you need to take the high ground on this and provide real good leadership because the mood was, you know, it was really very conflicted and there were a lot of people that were bent out of shape but the attitude that we had at our home was to be more open and welcoming and we really saw that this was a terrible injustice to African-Americans. And so that was how our household felt about it and so nothing ever came of that, but I know my mother had just kinda prepared me, "Well, just in case something happens, you need to know where you need to stand as a responsible citizen and as a Christian on this whole matter." But it didn't come to that.

Brittany Looney: What was your stand on the matter?

Fred Morton: Well, I was in favor of, you know, desegregating the schools. A number of us, particularly in the mid-50s began to see that the patterns of racial segregation were a horrible

[0:13:00] injustice to the African-Americans and that this needed to change. But, I mean, there was very, I guess, little that we thought that we could do about it at that particular time. But I know that by the time that I went off to college, that was one of the, sort of, the burning passions that I had was to be a part of the solution to this horrible problem that had kinda besieged our part of the country for over a century and do what we could to make things better.

Brittany Looney: How did the school, the student body react to Little Rock Central?

Fred Morton: There was, I guess, very little awareness or talk about it, at least at school, that I recall. I mean there was a lot of attention paid to kinda the controversy that was going on in Little Rock, but it wasn't talked about very much. Certainly, it wasn't talked about in the schools. It wasn't talked about openly

[0:14:00] in the church at that particular time. It was more or less private conversations, mostly between, you know, my mother and myself, frankly.

Brittany Looney: Did the school in any way prepare you all for desegregation, as far as, you know, maybe warning or having talks about –

Fred Morton: No, it was nothing was ever said in school, you know, to us about that I recall and nothing was ever said in church that I recall.

Brittany Looney: Can you talk a little about your college experience?

Fred Morton: Well, I went to the school in the east. I went to Princeton University and which was a wonderful opportunity, educational opportunity, but I entered the freshman class in fall of 1958 and there were over 700 students in my freshman class, all male, and only 3 were African-American

[0:15:00] and only one of whom graduated with me. There were only three African-Americans and one of the project that I was involved in with a number of students in our religious group was to try to recruit students to apply to Princeton and I remember writing a couple of letters to principals at the local high schools here in Memphis urging them to have students apply and it took about another six or eight years before there were a significant number of students that were admitted to Princeton.

Brittany Looney: Can you talk a little bit about your involvement with the community in the church now?

Fred Morton: The last three-and-a-half years, I've gotten sort of re-involved in the community and just felt the need to find some significant kind of volunteer work and so I just came back to my old neighborhood and I mean it's one that I knew and there were still a number of people here at the home church that I knew.

[0:16:00]

And I felt like I could identify with it, so the last, I've been working with the church, with the Community of Shalom and the Corners of Highland Heights, and with other people working in the neighborhood with the Boy Scouts and others to try to do what we can to make life better for the people that live here.

Brittany Looney: And what made you come back?

Fred Morton: Well, a part of it, perhaps was sentimental. I mean this is where I was born and grew up. This was my home church and this is where my wife and I got married and our first child was baptized here, so had a lot of strong associations with the church. I don't have any family members that are still here now. So I had a lot of, you know, old ties, you know, to the church and to the community.

Brittany Looney: So you left the church and came or did you still attend the church while you were, I guess, absent from _____?

Fred Morton: Oh, no, no. No, when I graduated from college, I went into the ministry and went on to seminary and then served in churches throughout West Kentucky and West Tennessee until I retried about

[0:17:00] eight years ago and then when I retired, well that's when, kinda, eventually gravitated back here to Highland Heights.

Brittany Looney: What types of programs are the most beneficial, I guess, for the neighborhood and what other programs do you want to see develop or happen?

Fred Morton: Well, the two programs that I'm most specifically involved in are the scouting program, to make scouting available to young men and young women in the neighborhood. I think it's a wonderful character-building experience as well as a wonderful opportunity

for young people to, you know, to go out and go camping and get out of doors and get out of the city and that sort of thing. So I'm working with the scouts and then also with the First Words Tutoring Program here at Treadwell, we provide tutoring services for children, primarily at Treadwell elementary and middle school.

Brittany Looney: What

[0:18:01] triumphs and problems do you face with the First Words Program and the Boy Scouts, if there are any?

Fred Morton: Well, with the Boy Scouts it's been really challenging. The boys that live in this neighborhood typically come out of homes that are single-parent and especially working parents and those programs really depend on parent involvement. And so that's been very difficult for the parents to be involved in a significant way so that the younger boys could participate in that and then the older Boy Scouts, again, it sorta assumes some significant parent and, you know, support of that and sometimes we don't see that as much as we like. So while the boys seem to have some interest in wanting to go camping and that sort of thing, it's been very difficult to involve them in the program

[0:19:00] in a sustaining way. So a number have gotten involved and they had some good experience and that may be sort of limited, but what we really like to have them involved, you know, in an ongoing way. And that's been a challenge for that to happen.

Brittany Looney: What do you see as the benefit for the Boy Scouts or –

Fred Morton: Well, I guess one of the primary things is for them to have some positive role models to identify with and with adults. But practically speaking, that's sort of a challenge. In our Boy Scout troop, we have only one African-American adult. The other three of us are Caucasian, so which puts sort of a challenge there but I think having, you know, adult male leadership that they can identify with and then having some really good experiences and learning responsibility and independence and then just kinda getting out of the city and getting into the woods is I think always a good experience.

Brittany Looney: Go ahead.

Diana Lemus: What did you do

[0:20:00] in the Boy Scouts?

Fred Morton: What do I do in the Boy Scouts?

Diana Lemus: Yeah.

Fred Morton: Well, we go camping about once a month and then we go to summer camp, you know, in the summer for a week and so, you know, we get out in the woods. We go canoeing, we go swimming and that sort of thing. They learn about nature and camp crafts, how to tie knots and all of those kinda things that are really neat. Yeah.

Brittany Looney: Is there an individual with First Words or even Boy Scouts in particular that stands out to you, who has benefitted or has gone on and done other things for their community? Is there a significant individual who stands out who has greatly benefitted from these types of programs?

Fred Morton: Well, right now in our Boy Scout troop, we have three young men that are close to becoming Eagle Scouts and I think that'll be a really, very significant achievement on their part, to become Eagle Scouts.

[0:21:00] Which is, you know, I guess there are maybe a little over 1 million boys who've become Eagle Scouts in the 100 years that scouting has been around, so that's gonna be an outstanding achievement for these young men. And we're hoping that others come along will do the same thing.

Brittany Looney: Are there many who become Eagle Scouts or –

Fred Morton: Well they are few and far between, yeah, yeah. Yeah, very few. Yeah, mm-hmm.

Brittany Looney: Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your experience with the neighborhood and growing up here in Highland Heights and Treadwell that you'd like to share?

Fred Morton: Yeah, well one thing I'd really like to say is I've been involved in tutoring in the elementary school as well as the middle school the last three years and it's just been really very wonderful and invigorating to get back into school and to meet the young people. I mean, it's not all that different than when I was there, you know, 60 years ago, and the teachers are great. They're inspiring. They're hard-working. The students are

[0:22:00] loveable and fun-loving and so it's not all that different than when I was there and so a lot of things change, but some things don't change and so, you know, the teachers and the students, it's still very much the same kinda place. It's a place of meeting other young people and having a good time and then growing in live and learning and those things hadn't changed. It's still a good place.

Brittany Looney: What other things would you say has not changed about the neighborhood and Treadwell, since you've been here?

Fred Morton: In a sense, some of the architectural things that have remained the same. Like, if you go up and down Summer Avenue, some of the big churches, St. Michael Catholic Church to the east of us, the Methodist Church here on this corner, the Baptist Church just down the hall a block and then the New Tyler AME Church at the corner of Holmes and Summer, they're still there. Treadwell School is still pretty much the way it was 50 and 60 years ago

[0:23:00] although they tore down the original building there that was so beautiful and replaced it with a new kind of a preschool facility which is very functional but it doesn't look near as good as the old one, you know? So, but architecturally, you have these – and in Grahamwood School, too, these schools, these architectural things that stand out. The businesses up and down Summer Avenue. Summer Avenue was called the Bristol Highway at one point back 100 years ago. They opened up the highway. It went all the way from Bristol, Tennessee to California and it's always been a lot of activity up and down Summer Avenue. Businesses changing and that sort of thing, but there's, you know, still a lot of vibrant businesses along Summer Avenue.

Brittany Looney: So you would say the churches and the schools are mostly the more longer-lasting landmarks here in this –

Fred Morton: Well they seem to have a little bit more permanence

[0:24:00] than some of the other things. But the real challenge to these churches, frankly, is that most of the members of the church are old-time residents. We don't have as many people with younger families who live in the community and are members of the church here. So that's sort of a sad thing that a lot of, well the Baptist Church and the Methodist Church sort of, kind of on our last leg as far as the people that are members there who are kinda holding on and keeping the church open.

Brittany Looney: One more thing I would like to add. Do you recall the fire that happened at Treadwell?

Fred Morton: Oh, I do. Yeah. It's about 194- yeah, I remember it because my grandmother just lived a block from the school and I remember our walking over to see the fire there. Yeah, I remember that, vividly. Mm-hmm.

Brittany Looney: Could you tell us about the experience a little bit, if you have any –

Fred Morton: Well, I just remember,

[0:25:00] and I was about seven or eight years old, just walking over there and looking at, and worrying that the whole school had burned down. They said, "No, no, it was just the old auditorium or library," I think. And so within a year's time, they had rebuilt that and, you know, that's where the auditorium is now, the current auditorium – that was the general site. I think it was a gym and auditorium at that time, it burned down. But no, they rebuilt that in short order and it was fine.

Brittany Looney: How old were you and how many people, I guess, gathered around to see that?

Fred Morton: Oh, at that, there must have been, you know, 100 people or so kinda gathered around, sorta watching the smoldering ruins, you know? That's 'cause we just had to walk, you know, a block over to the school to see it all. Mm-hmm.

Brittany Looney: Well, I'd like to thank you for –

Fred Morton: Well, thank you.

Brittany Looney: - sharing your story with us today.

Fred Morton: Yeah.

[End of Audio]