

hazelwood VOICES

CROSSING FENCES
CONNECTING AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN AND BOYS
THROUGH THE ORAL TRADITION

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at Center of Life.

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FOREWORD

Crossing Fences is a community program based on a simple, age-old process – people learning from one another through the oral tradition. There are stories, insights, perspectives and facts within all of us. And, all too often, we take little time to share them.

In Summer 2012, SLB Radio Productions, Inc. (SLB), in partnership with Center of Life, convened a group of students at Keystone Church of Hazelwood. While learning about digital audio recording, the group also spent time discussing attributes of male role models and identifying African American men with a connection to Hazelwood to be interviewed. With support as needed, students then arranged, conducted and edited the interviews presented in this book and CD. Each student received a netbook computer as a reward for the hard work involved in giving voice to others.

Additional audio and photos are available at www.neighborhoodvoices.org/crossingfences. Special thanks to Pastor Tim Smith, Terry Levels, Adam Keene and everyone at Center of Life.

For additional copies of this book, other neighborhood oral history publications, or information about conducting a project in your own community, contact SLB Radio Productions, Inc. at slb@slbradio.org or 412.586.6300.



CHRIS DOTSON, SR.

Born 1970 - Cheney Grad, Passionate Dad

Interview by Adam Keene

Excerpts from Track 1

Cheney University saved my life. When I graduated from high school that summer, crack was heavy. I was only home that summer. I left in the middle of August to start school. Every time I would come home, either one of my friends was killed, they didn't get along with each other, or was in jail. So I know I would have been out there in that.

*It was a pleasure to interview him.
He is a guy with a ton of energy. He is
very passionate about being a father, very
passionate about being a husband - and
not just any husband, not just any father -
but a great one.*

- Adam Keene, age 23

There was a man named Booker Reeves who actually helped me get into school. He was telling us about Cheney. I had thought about college, but I had no money for college...my mom didn't have any money for college. He talked to us like we could do it...you can go to a four year university. I signed up...they accepted me, had some money ready to go. Sometimes I think where would I be if I didn't go?

When [my son] was first born... from the crease of my elbow to the beginning of my wrist on my hand, in between that area, he could fit, right between there. And I would hold him right there. And I was like, "Wow, somebody I never met in my life could change my life in such a way that it could make me a better person." I don't know this dude, I knew my family for my whole life, but this little dude right here changed me. I'm not in it for myself anymore. I have people depending upon me.



NEIL MARTIN

Born 1966 - Inspiring Entrepreneur

Interview by Shyheim Banks, Christopher Dotson, Jr.,

Bryan Eberhardt & Adam Keene

Excerpts from Track 2

It doesn't matter what you go through, it doesn't matter what type of struggle you have in your life, as long as in the end there is a win.

I look at this community, I look at all the positive things that are going on now. This community has so much potential. There's endless possibilities of success for the next generations.

I always thought back on some of the things that my father had instilled in us, as far as working hard and being able to work on houses. When he passed, he had all these tools and trucks sitting around, and a lot of the things I learned from him, I started applying to neighbors and friends, whereas a lot of my friends, they didn't have that.

The right thing came out of it, being responsible came out of it. I'm a licensed contractor...I always wanted to start my own business. That was always a dream of mine. I've been doing this type of work for a long time. I really enjoy it and I'm really enjoying the aspect of teaching others how to do it now.

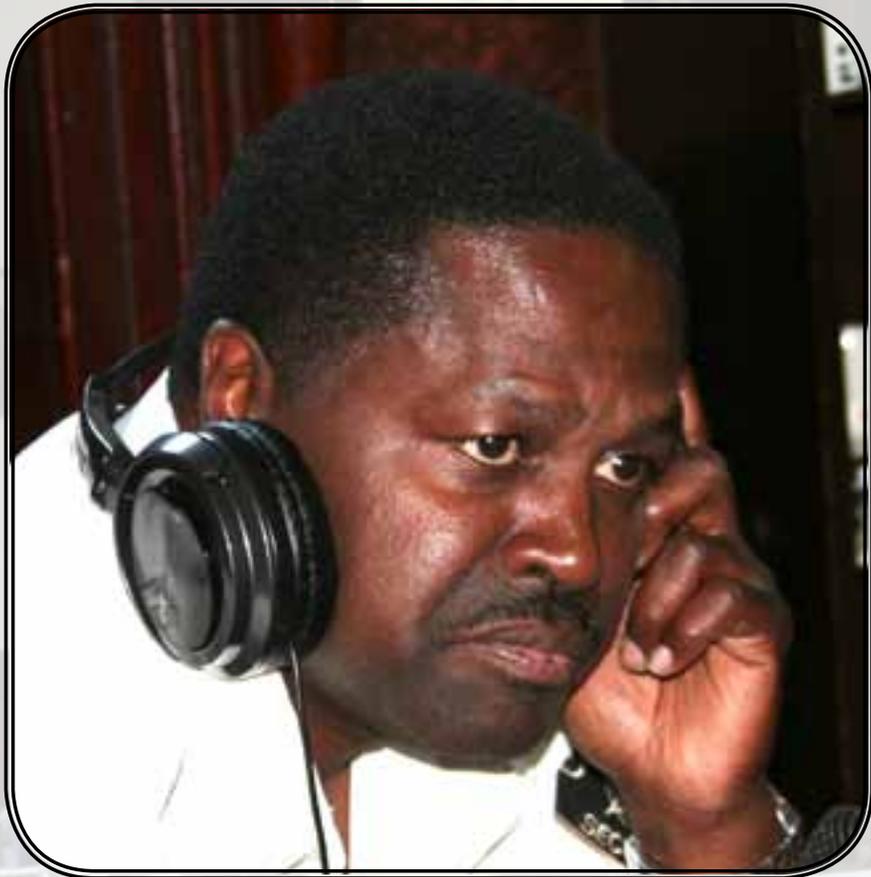
If you have a business idea...put it on paper and then research everything about it. The biggest fear about starting a business is the unknown. But it cannot progress unless you go through that fear. We have to execute our ideas and in the end, even if you fail, the experience that you gain out of your failure is great. So the next time around, you're not going to make the same mistakes that caused you to fail. Business, life, everything comes together. If you enjoy what you're doing, and you learn it, and you become good at it, a lot of greatness is going to come out of it.

***The one that really inspired me was
"Get to it, through it, and do it."
I will be tweeting that soon!***

– Shyheim Banks, age 15

His mother had twelve boys and twelve girls!

– Bryan Eberhardt, age 12



DUANE RENTAS

Born 1963 - Motivational Leader

Interview by Shyheim Banks & Rashaud Foster

Excerpts from Track 3

Wherever I'm going to go, I'm going to be dealing with the youth inside of the urban communities. It's all about *each one, teach one*, and it's all about being able to guide and give some leadership to young brothers and sisters from mistakes that we've seen that we've gone through in life. There's just certain things that come with age.

You guys are the next Obamas, you guys are the next world leaders, you guys are the next astronauts, doctors, philosophers. So then, I invest in that which is going to be our future.

We also have to be able to become entrepreneurs. How many times you hear people say there ain't no jobs? Well, create one. You're a genius. Manifest that so that you can provide jobs for others. You don't have to cry for others to do for you what you can naturally do yourself. What's your gift? You got one...find it and sell it. Be it t-shirts, be it your gift of words, be it your gift of lyric...we don't have to lose our mind and stay in a depressed state because nobody will employ us.

Whatever it is that you want to do, you can do it. Everything that you see is the manifestation of somebody's dream. Nothing is not obtainable. The world is yours.

His life story touched me and I think he should keep on inspiring other people.

– Rashaud Foster, age 16

He should be a motivational speaker. Everything he said was words of wisdom.

– Shyheim Banks, age 15

KEITH ROBINSON

Born 1962 - Carpenter, Counselor, Dad

Phone interview by Trevon Moore & Rahmod Robinson

Excerpts from Track 4

I come from a family of sixteen. Ten boys and six girls. The first five or six of my brothers, they all worked hard, really hard, in the steel mill. I grew up in that era where the steel mill was the community. Everybody worked in the steel mill. My father told me... go be a carpenter and see how it is. So I went in the military and I became a carpenter.

My dad was a crane operator in the steel mill. My mother never worked. I have to give you guys respect, because a lot of you guys are growing up in single parent families. We didn't do that. I knew everybody in my community at that time. I knew their moms and dads. Their moms and dads were there.

I'm a man that raised my last two kids... on my own. [It was] very hard, because my kids had become latchkey kids. They were going to elementary school. I had to be to work at six... So I left at 5:30 to get to my job and when I got in... I had to make the phone call home [to tell] my kids what to do... And I did that for five years.

He told me that if you hang out with negative people, negative things will happen and if you hang out with positive people, positive things will happen.

– Trevon Moore, age 13

My favorite part was when he told me he used to live next to Rodney King.

– Rahmod Robinson, age 13

I'm happily married, I love my wife. Make sure you find a girlfriend that's a friend... 'cause if you got a girlfriend that's a friend, she's gonna be in your corner regardless. She's gonna know your struggles.

My twin brother spent 11 years in prison. Every time he went there he ran into probably half the kids that I counseled at Allegheny Academy. Don't end up there.

You've got to live by example. If you keep a lot of positive people in your life, you'll go far. That's something I've always told my kids. Stay with the negatives, you're going to get negative out of it. Stay with positive people, you get positive out of it.



DR. RODNEY HOPSON

Born 1965 - Professor, Social Justice Advocate

Interview by Adam Keene, Bryan Eberhardt & Chris Hopson, Jr.

Excerpts from Track 5

I'm a professor at Duquesne University. I take my classes to Wilkinsburg and Hazelwood to do things here for the community. They hear about neighborhoods like Hazelwood and Wilkinsburg, but they don't come to get their groceries from here or buy anything from here. They're usually told this is a dangerous place. Some of them have even told me that their parents say we shouldn't be in Hazelwood.

As teachers, principals and school leaders, I need my students to be engaged in communities because there are kids they might teach [there]. How are they going to say, "I've got kids from Hazelwood but I've never been there?" I'm trying to get my students to engage with communities that they hear about, and sometimes don't know, but will find themselves working in.

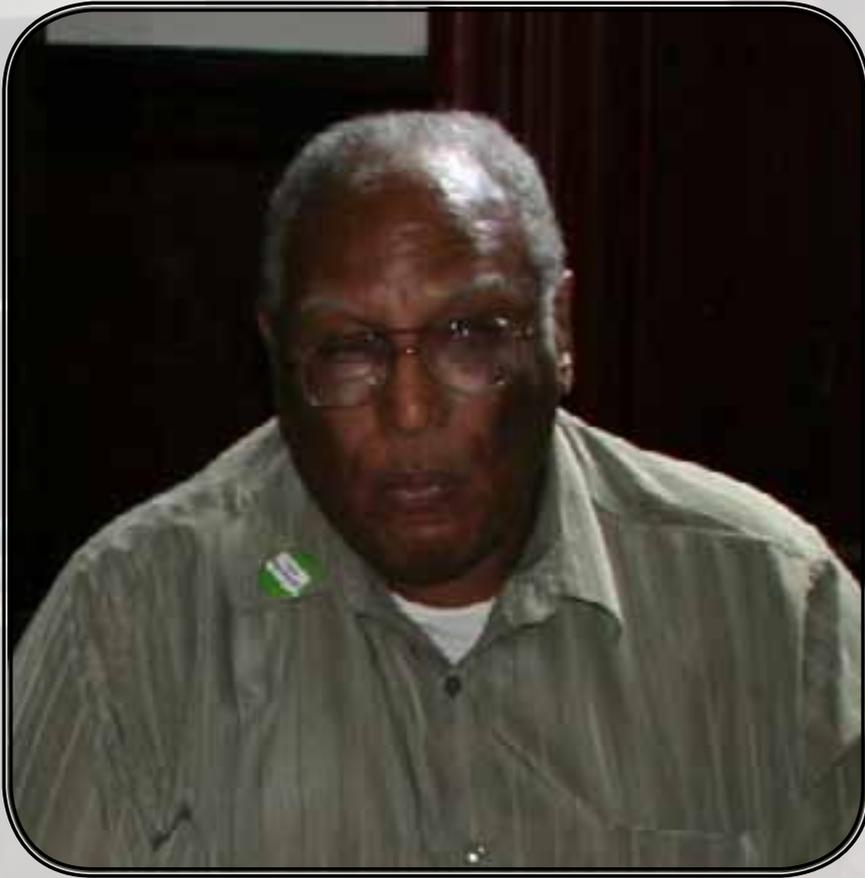
A question in the New Testament is, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" If somebody said, "What good can come out of Hazelwood?" what would you say? If you think something like recycling can come out of Hazelwood, or the next leader of Alcoa, or the next President of the United States, or the next ball player...if you think like that, if you can imagine that, then that's what good should be coming out of Hazelwood. You gotta recognize that something good's got to come out of not just the place I live, but who I am.

He is someone who cares – cares about the community, cares about social justice, cares about his students, and cares about exposing and informing his students to different environments.

– Adam Keene, age 23

I really enjoyed interviewing him. I learned a lot... and it was really interesting.

– Chris Dotson, Jr., age 11



HOMER CRAIG

Born 1939 - Veteran, Police Sergeant

Interview by Shyheim Banks, Rashaud Foster & Israel Higgins

Excerpts from Track 6

In certain aspects the old days were much better, but you can't go back. You have to move forward in life. There were drawbacks in the old days...For one thing, even though Hazelwood was a unique community, racism was a problem. Being shut out of jobs just for your skin color, being shut out of educational opportunities just for your skin color, that wasn't a

He told us that to be better males in the community, you have to find yourself - you have to research where you came from and never give up.

– Rashaud Foster, age 16

He's been through a lot. He joined the army, he's been to other countries, he learned German, he did a lot of things.

– Shyheim Banks, age 15

pleasant thing. But that's the way life was then, and you strove to work your way out of that.

My ideal for a good community is harmony... When I was growing up, our schools were in our neighborhood, our teachers knew us as individuals, not just numbers, and our parents and neighbors knew us...if you messed up, not only would your parents discipline you when they found out, but any neighbor, any teacher could do the same thing. But it wasn't something that was misused or cruelty, it was done with love and kindness and toward the target of making a better person.

Everybody should define themselves. You can call me any name you want to, but I know who I am and I define who I am, and I tell you who I am. I tell you that by saying words, but also I tell you who I am by the way I carry myself. If I allow myself to descend to a certain level, then that's who I am. But if I'm always striving to go higher...then that's defining, too. Be the person you want to be, even if you aren't now, strive towards it.



ALFREDO RUSSELL

Born 1939 - Renowned Chef

Interview by Adam Keene

Excerpts from Track 7

I was born in The Bahamas, in a place called Mastic Point, Andros, a small community where everybody knows everybody. We did good, we never want for anything, [but] I had a different vision at that age. It just seemed that island was too small for me. I left Andros when I was fourteen years old and I went to Nassau. I stayed

for three, four years and I got a job on a sight-seeing boat taking passengers from Nassau to Paradise Island. This man and his wife...they said, "You know, me and my husband, we was talking about you and we like you. And we was wondering would you like to go to United States to be our chauffeur and butler?"

And I said, "Okay, fine." So I came to the United States, to Fort Lauderdale. In 1976, a lady called and said "How would you like to go to Pittsburgh?" [and I said] "Who, me? I don't know nothing about Pittsburgh." And she said, "They will take care of you." So, after a while, I agree.

I set my goals in Pittsburgh: I want to own my own place, I want to be in the newspaper, I want to be on TV, and I want to be a caterer. And I achieve them all, achieve all the goals 'cause I find the way I fit in Pittsburgh and I never look behind. So Pittsburgh was good for me, all the way around.

I wanted to retire, get out of the food business, but something keeps telling me "no, you ain't over yet". I'm heading to Hazelwood...I attend church in Hazelwood. My goal in Hazelwood is to teach the young brothers and sisters the art of cooking, because I see it's a need...I don't want to go to a place where you're not needed, I wanna go to a place where you're needed, because if you're needed, I believe you'll be successful.

He is a guy who has a rich river of experiences running through his life. He's courageous, that's what comes to mind.

- Adam Keene, age 23



REV. MICHAEL MURRAY

Born 1954 - Helps Repair Pipes, People

Phone interview by Israel Higgins & Floyd Nichols

Excerpts from Track 8

My parents were church related people. They believed in serving God, so they brought me up doing the same. So I attended Sunday school. I was doing that at a very early age, 8, 9 years old, and I continued doing that for years, finally beginning to get my own personal interest in who God is, what does it mean for God to say that He loves me, and what does it mean

I have taken home several blessings and I hope that our future listeners will also.

– Israel Higgins, age 16

He shared a great experience with me, told me a lot of things that I've never known before.

– Floyd Nichols, age 15

that I'm supposed to treat my neighbor as myself. As I continued getting older...I wanted to know [these things] on a more serious level. I never pursued the calling of pastoring but...it seems like I was headed that way and didn't even know it.

I am employed by the Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority [as a] pipeline repair specialist. The church I pastor is in McKees Rocks. What I'm responsible to do in some areas as [pipeline] repair, I am responsible for in the clerical area. People's lives are broken, they need repair. And [just as in water] purity...God's given me the opportunity to help people realize that the purer lifestyle we live, the more moral lifestyle we live, the better it will be.

There is a value system that needs to be lived in life. Number 1, it can be lived -- it's possible. Number 2...I believe it can't be done without living a God-fearing lifestyle. If you,...and any friends you know by living it yourself, will share and live those principles of law, you'll be as successful as I am if not better.



DARNELL CAMPBELL

Born 1989 - College Student

Interview by Wesley Smith & Floyd Nichols

Excerpts from Track 9

When I was younger there was more positivity in the neighborhood...more activity for youth, there was the Y programs and the football organizations. Then [in my] teenage years, it became drug infested or gang infested...I lost a lot of friends either to jail or they passed away from doing things they weren't supposed to do. I basically branched out on my own,

isolating myself, me and a couple friends, and now I'm in college and doing what I have to do.

I was definitely a fighter. I didn't care who it was. I got kicked out of several schools for fighting teachers. I always got my work done, but after I got my work done I felt as though I could do whatever I please.

High school, ninth grade: girls. That's all I hung around. It was like me, one of my closest friends, and girls. Girls really don't like prison...that kept me focused. I would say my mother, too. My mother is definitely a strong-willed woman.

I never had a dad. When I was 10 he was murdered somehow, but he was never around so it really didn't bother me. But it bothered me at some point, I guess you can say, because everyone wants a father figure around. My mom, being so strong showed me that, if she can overcome everything that she overcame, then I can definitely do things right for my mother. I can definitely change my ways for her and give her a better life.

You have to stay dedicated, determined and be disciplined at all times, for whatever it is you're doing. That's the best way of achieving your goals.

It was a rough road for him. In high school he worked on his attitude and he became a better person.

– Floyd Nichols, age 15



MAURICE COLES

Born 1970 - Coach, Mentor

Interview by Hasson Jackson & Sterling Jones

Excerpts from Track 10

There's nothing like being able to uplift some children, because when I was a kid I didn't have a mother or a father. I was raised by my grandmother. So the people at the YMCA, they took time out to be bothered with kids like me and other kids in the neighborhood, to make something for us to do. They gave to me so I feel like it's my obligation to give back.

They took the time out to show me and to give me love, structure, discipline -- that felt good. When I became an adult, I already knew that was something I was going to be doing. I think it's only right when you become an adult if you have any free time, give the kids some of your free time.

When parents get involved, I believe programs run better because there's nothing like seeing your parents sit there to see you play. Because kids want somebody to cheer for them, too. If you gotta work, that's one thing, but if you're just sitting home on the couch, that's not gonna work.

Hazelwood is nothing compared to the way it used to be. You wasn't even allowed out here unless you was coming out with somebody that had some pull. Now, it's a whole lot better...because I've seen the bad part and to see it come back around and to try to be part of the solution...that's very gratifying. And it's good to see because, y'all kids deserve a chance. Right now, it's a beautiful time in Hazelwood and I can definitely see that it's gonna get a whole lot better.

He's a role model because he does a lot of stuff to help his community.

– Sterling Jones, age 13

He inspires me because he's like that ten-minute father figure who will get on you about going to school and learning and reading and all that cool stuff.

– Hasson Jackson, age 13



PASTOR TIM SMITH

Born 1959 - Community Pillar, Spiritual Leader

*Interview by Wesley Smith, Israel Higgins, Shyheim Banks
& Adam Keene*

Excerpts from Track 11

The church had a huge influence on me...I'd say more my dad than the church, because my father was a person who was on the ground; he was a foot soldier. He believed in touching people's lives. He wasn't stuck in the pulpit or stuck in his office. He was among people and you would never know he was a pastor if you didn't know.

We basically got a whole new side of Pastor Tim. All we knew was the cool Pastor Tim. We didn't know the sensitive or wise Pastor Tim.

- Shyheim Banks, age 15

I am highly grateful that he did the interview.

- Wesley Smith, age 16

The people in Hazelwood – it's just proof that you can't judge a book by its cover. The things I heard about Hazelwood was not what I experienced when I started building relationships with people. When I started building relationships with folks, I fell in love with...the people of this community...so much so, when I got married, my wife and I moved here.

My father taught me how to live and he taught me how to die. He basically told the doctor, "Look, I don't want you to give me anything else, no more operations, no more procedures, just give me something so I don't feel the pain." And I was so proud of him, because that was his decision. He didn't want to be on life support...he just wanted to go when it was time to go.

Keep track...of the stuff of your life, the things that you love, the things around you, because things do change over time. I say you get one day. All you have is today; yesterday's gone and there's no such thing as tomorrow, unless it comes...experience this day, because you will never see it again.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the individuals represented and do not necessarily reflect those of The Heinz Endowments, Center of Life, or any other collaborating organization.

TRACK LISTING

1. CHRIS DOTSON, SR.
2. NEIL MARTIN
3. DUANE RENTAS
4. KEITH ROBINSON
5. DR. RODNEY HOPSON
6. HOMER CRAIG
7. ALFREDO RUSSELL
8. REV. MICHAEL MURRAY
9. DARNELL CAMPBELL
10. MAURICE COLES
11. PASTOR TIM SMITH

YOUTH REFLECTIONS APPEAR ON TRACKS 12 - 22

A person wearing a yellow hoodie and blue headphones is focused on working on a Toshiba laptop. In the foreground, a white sign with hand-drawn text in red and blue ink reads "EDITING STUDIO". The word "EDITING" is on the top line and "STUDIO" is on the bottom line. To the right of "EDITING", there are some faint, partially visible handwritten letters "AD" and "AC".

EDITING
STUDIO