



wilkinsburg VOICES

CROSSING FENCES

*CONNECTING AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN AND BOYS
THROUGH THE ORAL TRADITION*



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Wilkinsburg Voices is based on interviews collected by students at
 YouthPlaces and at Wilkinsburg High School.



youthplaces





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 2014, SLB Radio Productions, Inc. (SLB), convened a group of students at YouthPlaces and Wilkinsburg High School in partnership with each organization. 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 Wilkinsburg 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 tablet 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 Mayor John Thompson, Tammy Brown, Aaron Altemus, Stephen Puskar, Donte Pendleton, Woodrow Yates and everyone at YouthPlaces and Wilkinsburg High School.

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.



PARADISE GRAY

Born 1964 - Hip-Hop Artist, Curator, Archivist, Activist

Interview by Davon Moultrie & Joshua Hodeney

Excerpts from Track 1

I was born in a small town in North Carolina. We didn't have any electricity, no running water in the house. My mom didn't want me, my brother and sister picking cotton and tobacco. She packed us up and moved us to New York. She put us on a Greyhound bus. That was the day that Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed. That was 1968. We got off the bus in Harlem and New York was on fire.

It was incredible to grow up in a community where the older dudes had street rules laid down for us. If you were young, you had to make good decisions.

In 1988, we formed the Blackwatch Movement after the murder of a young man. We fought for justice for young people who were being shot in the street and harassed by the police. I'm still outraged, but at the same time I'm hopeful, because I see young people standing up and taking this seriously, becoming active themselves. Young people around the world are always the ones who demand and make real change.

I just finished writing a book on the club that I ran in New York. It was the incubator of the golden era of hip-hop. It was called the Latin Quarters. We ushered in a new generation of hip-hop. New York was the birthplace of hip-hop.

True success for me is to see my people stand up and live the kind of lifestyle that we deserve. Your life matters. You are important – your story matters.

His story is amazing. I would like to interview him again.

- Joshua Hodeney, age 15

It was inspiring to hear what he went through at a young age.

- Davon Moultrie, age 17



KIRK HOLBROOK

Born 1980 - Legislative Assistant to State Representative Jake Wheatley

Interview by Jaquan Betts & Sam Brown

Excerpts from Track 2

Crime and gangs were a big part of growing up. I was very fortunate to have my mom and dad in my life. I had a great foundation. My family structure has done a lot, so when I didn't do what I was supposed to do, the things they instilled in me always pulled me back. I was one of those kids who people thought was going to end up in a really bad place. It was hard to see a future

I learned that even if life knocks you down, never be scared to get back up, get on track and do the right thing.

- Sam Brown, age 15

for yourself when a lot of the things going on around you were so negative. I struggled with seeing a positive road, I struggled with completing high school and I struggled to get myself on the right track.

I think the way I was able to overcome my struggles was realizing that there was something more that I had to offer. A lot of the guys people thought were the toughest were the most weak-minded. They were the biggest followers. I realized that leadership was having the courage to go against what everyone else was doing, and do what I knew to be right.

I want to be able to effect change on a larger scale, so I've spent ten years of my life working with young people. Now I realize that our nation is run by policy, so I want to put myself in position to advocate for policies that benefit children of color and communities of color.

Everyone that is around you does not always have your best interests in mind. Be smart, do what's best for you and believe that there is more to offer.

Kirk Holbrook is an inspiration and gave good advice on not living a lie.

- Jaquan Betts, age 17



MAYOR JOHN THOMPSON

Born 1955 - Mayor of Wilkinsburg

Interview by Isaiah Pete & Jesus Pierce

Excerpts from Track 3

I had seven brothers and sisters. I was the second oldest. I grew up kind of rough and we didn't have a whole lot, but the house was full of love. I remember my mother taking us down to the business district. We'd spend the whole day. We'd have lunch and she'd shop. Those are some of the fondest memories I have.

***I want to give back
to my community like he did.***

- Isaiah Pete, age 18

People told me to go to school, but I didn't have a lot of people around to support that. I used sports as a way of keeping myself in school. After I graduated I found an interest in wanting to better myself. I found out that I could do more than I thought I could do.

I always was intrigued by things that affected the working class. That influenced me to be a community activist. I was always coaching something, I was always helping with cleanups. Those things helped shape my life and put me on the path that led me to be mayor of this town.

I grew up during really good times. People moved away, the community changed, and we're trying to get it back. It's been difficult to live down a reputation. But people are moving back in the community, we've got development taking place, and houses are being built.

Today, more than ever, you need education. Education is the key to freedom. I think you ought to develop relationships with the community. You want to be an example to some of the young kids, because someone is always watching.

***He inspired me to do better in school
and to work hard.***

- Jesus Pierce, age 15



ANDRE SCOTT

Born 1982 - Legislative Assistant to State Rep. Ed Gainey

Interview by Marlin Rainey & Kevin Blackwell

Excerpts from Track 4

My connection to this neighborhood is as a 20-year resident. I'm an active community member. My best accomplishment was buying my house. I was able to meet one of the milestones I had for myself. It let me have a stable environment for me and my children.

My education in college was geared towards counselling, with psychology and sociology majors. I'm able to

***Mr. Andre likes music. I also like music.
We had a real connection after that.***

- Marlin Rainey, age 17

use them in my day-to-day work now. You have to know people's needs, and how to advise people. I use a lot of things I learned in school.

I want to finish my masters degree, get licensed so I can do therapy, open up a mentoring program to help young men, give my fellow young men a boost in the game. If I can be present, I think that will be beneficial. I want to help as many people as I can, in whatever avenue I can help.

Identify goals for yourself – as long as you meet those goals, you're a success. Be respectful. Know that people are different for a reason and embrace those differences. Always try to find a way to bring groups of people together.

***He is a noble man who speaks the truth.
He grew up here in Wilkinsburg, went to
college, and I could really relate to him.***

- Kevin Blackwell, age 14



GEORGE SPENCER, SR.

Born 1955 - President, MAD DADS

Interview by Aaron Wilson & Xavier Henry

Excerpts from Track 5

I grew up in what I would call the ambiance of the church; my family was rooted in faith. My social circle was rooted in it. I grew up in a neighborhood that was very close knit. All of our parents parented everyone's kids simultaneously. My mom is still with me and I have three children of my own.

He's a good man. He takes time out of his day to help others.

- Aaron Wilson, age 18

I attended what was then called Edinboro State College. It's now Edinboro University and that's where I met my wife. I later attended CCAC after a four-year military enlistment in the United States Army.

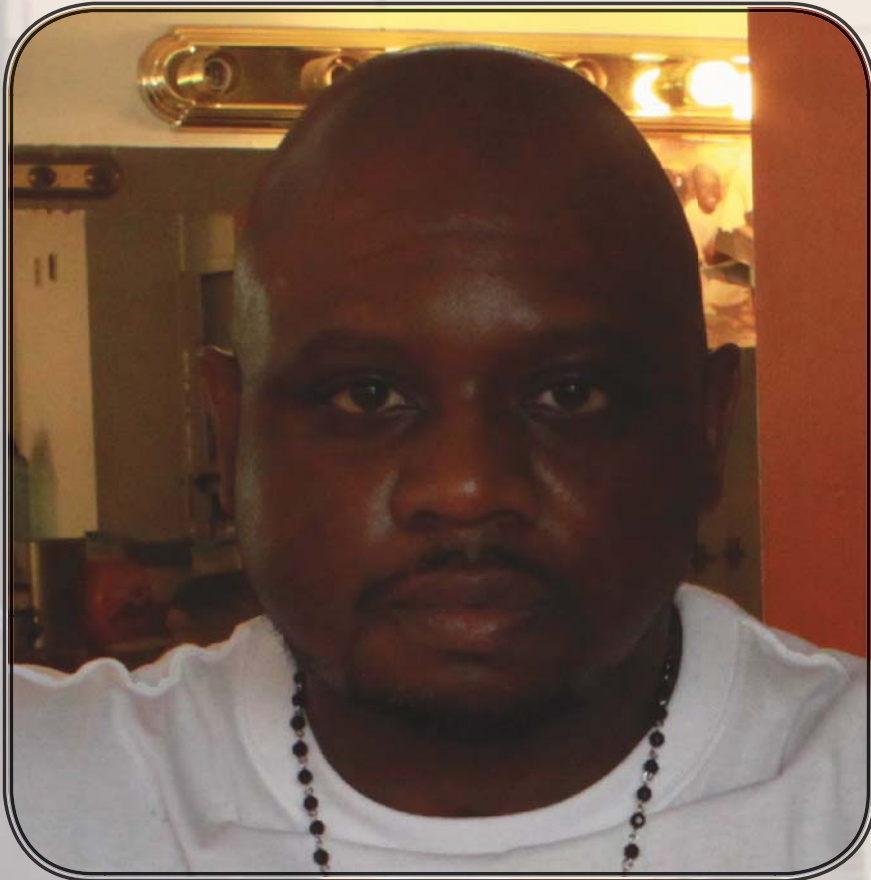
Struggle is an opportunity to gain strength. If you think of the principle of exercise, there's some measure of resistance that's necessary to grow stronger, and struggle produces that.

I am the founder and president of Greater Pittsburgh Area MAD DADS. My goal is for that to be a viable organization that impacts a violence problem throughout Allegheny County. I'm also chairman of the board for MAD DADS national.

It was difficult to start something brand new. It took diligence, perseverance, and commitment in order to see it come to fruition. Learn to recognize the winners in life. If you seek to be around people that you recognize wisdom in, you'll increase in wisdom yourself.

He inspired me because MAD DADS is working to make Wilkinsburg a better place to live.

- Xavier Henry, age 15



DEMETRIUS BALLARD

Born 1972 - Owner, Meache'z Y2KUTZ Barbershop

Interview by Solomon Morris & Marquise Pete

Excerpts from Track 6

I had a great childhood. I grew up in East Hills, had a great family structure and I played a lot of ball, rode a lot of bikes. I always had the conception of creating as a young child. I had great friends. I can't complain about my childhood, it was great. I'm still in touch with a lot of my friends from grade school. I grew up with white and black kids and Asian kids.

One of his goals was to be a minister. I found that interesting because to me that shows how much he appreciates God.

- Marquise Pete, age 13

I wanted to be an entertainer and I actually wanted to be a minister at one point. And I wanted to be a barber. I try to keep my goals within reach.

The secret to success in my eyes is to work hard at believing in yourself. Always keep God at the forefront, minimize the negative thought process in your mind, stay positive, surround yourself with good people, always address your peers with respect, and learn as much as you can.

Do not entertain negativity. Your lives are precious. Always remember that your parents love you. Always remember what it took for you to get here. You had to learn how to walk, talk, eat, get up and go to school every day, do a lot of homework, go to church, clean your room. These are things that are building you to become great men in life.

Education is the key. Once you embrace that, the doors of the world are going to open up to you.

Opening and being successful in his business inspired me.

- Solomon Morris, age 17



DENNIS WALKER

*Born 1969 - Program Manager, YouthPlaces
Interview by Solomon Morris & Loran Evans
Excerpts from Track 7*

My childhood was pretty good. I didn't have my dad growing up, but my grandfather stepped in that role. I lived with my three aunts, my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather, along with my brother.

We were always held to standards – if you say you're going to be somewhere on time, be there on time. Make sure your word is exactly that.

***His work at YouthPlaces inspires me.
There aren't many other people helping
to keep us kids off the street.***

- Solomon Morris, age 17

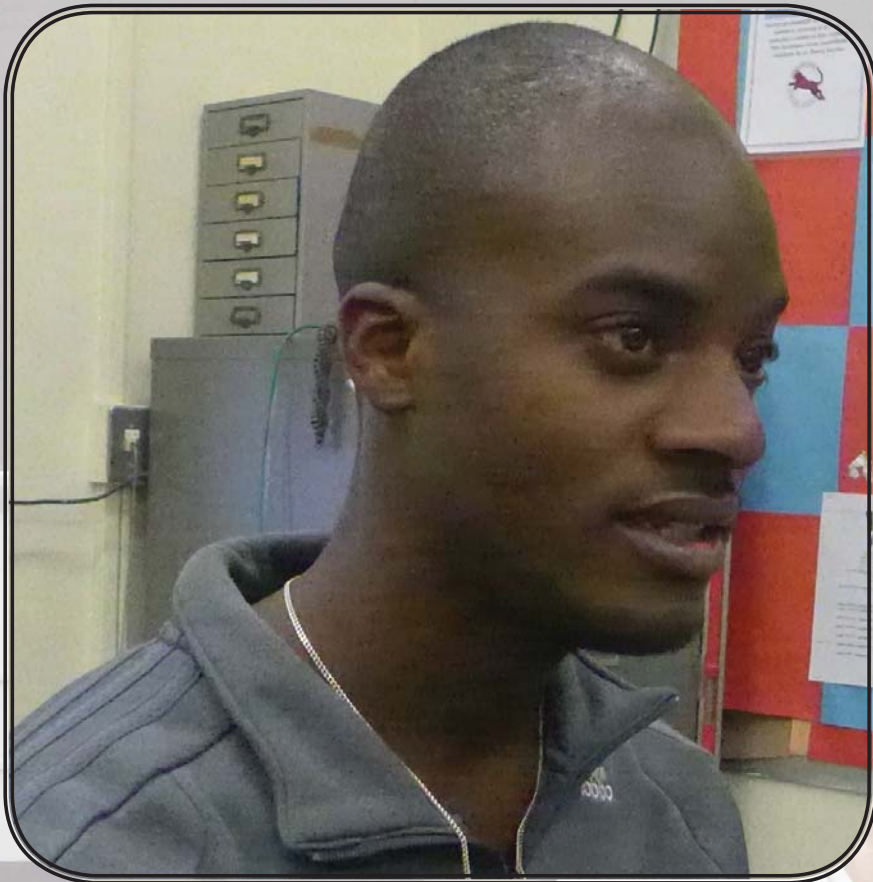
I've traveled all over the country playing different sports. It gives you a chance to see what other cities and cultures are like. It shows you how life was for different people.

My grandfather, who was a car salesman and a musician, was always working hard doing several projects at a time. He's been all around the world and it was definitely an inspiration to me as far as growing up and wanting to be like somebody. I had teachers that really meant a lot to me, and they took extra time out when it was time for me to step up. They wanted to make sure I was doing something with myself.

Work hard, always be honest. Give a good day's work when you're doing anything, whether it's schoolwork or actually on the job. Stick to your word. Anything you say you're going to do, make sure you complete it.

***He told me that I could do anything
as long as I put my mind to it.***

- Loran Evans, age 13



RICHARD BRADFORD

Born 1986 - Program Specialist, Allegheny County Department of Health & Human Services

Interview by Jaquan Betts & Sam Brown

Excerpts from Track 8

Both of my parents passed when I was extremely young. I was only a couple of weeks old when my mother passed and then my father passed before school age. My entire life was with my grandparents.

My maternal grandfather was my role model. His life story is a testament for African American

progress here in the United States. He was born during Jim Crow in Albany, Georgia. Because of the racial tensions and divide in the South he was only able to go up to the eighth grade. He did what he could to get himself out of that situation, was able to go to trade school here in the North, was able to work as a general contractor, support a family, buy property and live the American Dream.

He said, "No one gives a hoot about how you feel. Stop worrying about what they think of you, and do what you need to do to get where you need to go."

I don't think an environment cluttered with dilapidated, condemned buildings is beneficial for the public health. One of the worst things that occurred to this community is when the heart of the business district fell out. You do what you see, and when you don't see prosperity or opportunities, you act accordingly.

Never become a victim of the circumstances you're in. Always fight for what's better. Always do what's right, even when it doesn't appear that it's paying off. Life is so much better when you do what's right.

***He taught me that confidence is everything
and that there is no reason
to stop achieving your goals.***

- Sam Brown, age 15

I learned life is not all bad in Wilkinsburg.

- Jaquan Betts, age 17



GERALD BROOKS

Born 1988 - Motivational Speaker, Harlem Globe Trotter Showman

Interview by Aaron Wilson & Xavier Henry

Excerpts from Track 9

My childhood was good. The main thing I remember about my childhood is my father. He taught me a lot and I still use the merits that he gave me to this day.

I'm from a bad neighborhood, and I do motivational speaking for underprivileged youth in that neighborhood. The main problem in why they don't succeed is they feel they have to act a certain way to be successful. The number one thing is definitely what you value. If you value being a basketball player, then you would do what it takes to be a basketball player. You can't

cruise through life, doing whatever you want to do. There's going to be obstacles, it's going to be a process. That comes with values.

You have to have a goal. Be ready for the obstacles. You might have to climb the mountain instead of going the easy way, going through the tunnel.

The worst thing you can tell a kid where I'm from is that it's going to be okay – because when they leave school, they're right back to the misery of trying to survive. There needs to be some kind of medium. Somebody needs to make them interested in school versus interested in what's after school. Kids should be happy to go to school.

People argue that it's the branches on the tree, but it's the roots. You cut the branches off the tree, the branches will grow back; but if you take out the roots, that tree won't be there anymore.

He inspires me because he gives back to the community even though he's made it already.

- Aaron Wilson, age 18

He's inspiring because of the things that he's done and accomplished in life – and because of where he came from.

- Xavier Henry, age 15



OFFICER GIL STUBBS

Born 1975 - Officer, Wilkinsburg Police Department

Interview by Joshua Hodeney, Isaiah Pete & Davon Moultrie

Excerpts from Track 10

My childhood was wonderful. I had several role models growing up – my father and my mother were two very strong upstanding citizens. They were very strict. Growing up I didn't understand why they were so strict with me, and I thought that they were the bad guys. The way that I turned out as an adult, I think they had my best interest.

I learned a lot from the stories he told.

- Isaiah Pete, age 18

What I learned was to stay in school and be yourself.

- Joshua Hodeney, age 15

Being in law enforcement is where I want to be. I had a run-in with the police, and it wasn't pleasant. They accused me of committing a crime I didn't commit. My reason for becoming a police officer was inspired by that. I wanted there to be at least one good officer out there. I knew if I volunteered, it would be me. I'm here now, and I've met a number of officers who are excellent, and I'm very happy to be doing what I do today.

The community plays a major role in a lot of crimes being solved. The best thing that an officer can do is become a member of the community and let others know that he is willing to go the extra mile and do what it takes to keep this place safe.

When you get into trouble, that follows you around for life. Stay out of trouble, be your own self and say that ain't for me. Keep your own mind and keep your eyes focused on the prize, set goals, and don't stop until you get there.

One thing I learned from him was to be yourself. Don't let anyone change you.

- Davon Moultrie, age 17



REVEREND MARCUS HARVEY

Born 1952 - CEO, Strength Inc.

Interview by Jaquan Betts & Sam Brown

Excerpts from Track 11

I grew up in Homewood. We would come play basketball at the high school in Wilkinsburg. I have an older brother and a younger sister. My mom worked a couple jobs. I didn't meet my dad until after I was 20. I don't have a relationship with him because I really don't know him.

I learned that your neighborhood, background and skin color should mean nothing as to how far you want to go in life.

- Sam Brown, age 15

I like to do stuff in the community. We did all kinds of stuff like clean yards and help senior citizens. I created programs in the jails that dealt with recidivism and re-entry. I was concerned with people coming back out of institutions and doing the same thing that put them in jail. I had to go in the jail and work with them. I've been working in the community all the way from Wilkinsburg to the White House as a congressional fellow for faith-based initiatives throughout the United States, being a voice for the voiceless.

My greatest goal is to mentor young guys. I had a calling all my life and I found out along the way what it was. It was about one simple thing, reaching back and helping somebody. I'm not the type of preacher that's on a pulpit, preaching down on people. I'm the guy you're gonna see in the alleyways, picking up the derelicts, getting my hands dirty. We are responsible for our community. The worst thing you can do is nothing.

He touched me when he talked about the economy being worse because of black-on-black crime.

- Jaquan Betts, age 17



KYLE HOLBROOK

*Born 1980 - Artist, Community Activist
Interview by Davon Moultrie & Nick Jones
Excerpts from Track 12*

My mom and dad were both teachers. I always had what I needed. My dad died in my arms when I was 18, but I always felt lucky that I had a dad. A lot of my friends didn't have a dad. They would always come over, and my dad would be the quarterback when we played football, the pitcher when we played baseball.

***He was very open-minded and respectful.
I respect him a lot.***

- Davon Moultrie, age 17

I have a 15-year old daughter now. She's so much better than me at that time. I grew up fast. I had a gun on me every day from 14 years old on. I wish I could talk to my young self. I'm lucky to be here – I have 38 friends that aren't.

I painted 27 of them on the wall here. That would probably be my favorite mural, right on Penn Avenue. That one is a wall I looked at as a little kid and said 'I want to do that one day'. I didn't even know that mural was a word. It was a dream to do. It was the first grant that I got.

The road to success is the one less travelled. You need to be doing something that only you believe in. That means sometimes missing parties. Make that decision. Do what you got to do now to do what you want to do later.

Talking to him made me like art.

- Nick Jones, age 14



RALPH WATSON

Born 1958 - Independent Contractor

Interview by Marcus Brown, Jesus Pierce & Marlin Rainey

Excerpts from Track 13

My father worked as a laborer and a plumber. This allowed my mother to stay home and be a housewife and mother, and created wonderful situations for us. My older brother was a genius. I was not. I struggled to get C's, but that didn't stop me. In life you'll learn to play to your strengths. I got a tutor and always centered myself around people that could help me to be the best that I could be.

***I learned that while you're in school
you should pay attention.***

- Jesus Pierce, age 15

I was my class president. I was 19 when I got elected to the school board. It was a privilege to serve this community. I continue to serve the community. I see a lot of promise here. Development is a slow process, but change is good and we've got to embrace change and be part of that change. I continue to sit at tables that effect change and enhance the community.

One of my goals is never to retire. I will continue to serve on boards and commissions that directly affect the people sitting in front of me. I think that I'd like my legacy to be that I made a difference.

Being a black man in America is a struggle. The system is not designed for us. I get up every day with a purpose. You have to stay positive and upbeat and, of course, stay out of trouble. It's easy to get into, but it's hell to get out of.

***He had a purpose. He knew school was
important. Education, he said, is everything.***

- Marlin Rainey, age 17

***He taught us that we are important
and to always keep driving yourself.***

- Marcus Brown, age 15

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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, YouthPlaces, Wilkinsburg High School or any other collaborating organization.

TRACK LISTING

1. PARADISE GRAY
2. KIRK HOLBROOK
3. MAYOR JOHN THOMPSON
4. ANDRE SCOTT
5. GEORGE SPENCER, SR.
6. DEMETRIUS BALLARD
7. DENNIS WALKER
8. RICHARD BRADFORD
9. GERALD BROOKS
10. OFFICER GIL STUBBS
11. REVEREND MARCUS HARVEY
12. KYLE HOLBROOK
13. RALPH WATSON

YOUTH REFLECTIONS APPEAR ON TRACKS 14-26

