

A photograph of a man with a shaved head and a mustache, wearing a dark and light striped short-sleeved button-down shirt. He is sitting in a radio studio, smiling broadly at a professional microphone. In the foreground, the back of a person's head wearing large headphones is visible. The background shows a window with blinds and a white wall.

# PENN HILLS VOICES

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

Copyright © 2016 by SLB Radio Productions, Inc.

*Crossing Fences* is a project of SLB Radio Productions, Inc.  
*Penn Hills Voices* is based on interviews collected by students at  
Penn Hills YMCA.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b>	5
<b>THOMAS WALLACE</b> <i>Interview by Garrison Kemp, Raymeir Williams &amp; Ronald Wiggins</i> Track 1	6
<b>MARK SANDERS</b> <i>Interview by Cameron Tarrant, Daivon Stephens &amp; Tamar Patillo</i> Track 2	8
<b>COACH CRAIG WILLIAMS</b> <i>Interview by Miguel Jackson &amp; Cameron Griffin</i> Track 3	10
<b>COACH LOU RASH</b> <i>Interview by Cameron Tarrant, Daivon Stephens, Tamar Patillo</i> Track 4	12
<b>COACH ROBERT KEMP</b> <i>Interview by Cameron Griffin, Hezron Omune &amp; Jeremy Hamilton</i> Track 5	14
<b>COACH BRANDON IFILL</b> <i>Interview by Ronald Wiggins, Raymeir Williams &amp; Garrison Kemp</i> Track 6	16
<b>RON GRAHAM</b> <i>Interview by Miguel Jackson &amp; Cameron Jeffries</i> Track 7	18
<b>ERIC HARRIS</b> <i>Interview by Azeiryus Britt, Darrell Holloway, Dominic Burden</i> Track 8	20
<b>WALTER J. BENTLEY II</b> <i>Interview by Cameron Jeffries, Hezron Omune &amp; Jeremy Hamilton</i> Track 9	22
<b>ERIC "COOP" COOPER</b> <i>Interview by Dominic Burden, Azeiryus Britt &amp; Darrell Holloway</i> Track 10	24
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	26
<b>CD</b>	27



# 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 2016, SLB Radio Productions, Inc. (SLB), in partnership with the Penn Hills Midget Football Association and Penn Hills Varsity Football convened a group of students at the Penn Hills YMCA. 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 Penn Hills 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.

We extend our thanks to Coach Craig Williams, Thomas Wallace, Coach Robert Kemp, Ron Graham, Melissa Flodine, The Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pa. and everyone at the Penn Hills YMCA.

For 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](mailto:slb@slbradio.org) or 412.586.6300.

Additional audio and photos are available at:  
[www.neighborhoodvoices.org/crossingfences](http://www.neighborhoodvoices.org/crossingfences).



## THOMAS WALLACE

*Born 1980 — Executive Director, Penn Hills YMCA*

*Interview by Garrison Kemp, Raymeir Williams & Ronald Wiggins*

*Excerpts from Track 1*

I was born in Penn Hills. I grew up in Wilksburg. I'm the oldest of three siblings. My mother worked multiple part-time jobs which left me and my brothers roaming the streets and getting into trouble. I spent a period of my life homeless. I had family members' homes to go to, but I didn't want to jeopardize them. I didn't see myself living past 21 or 22.

It wasn't until my senior year that I started to realize I could do something different with my life. Tony Mitchell, the coach at Wilkinsburg High School, helped me get into college. Once I got into college I really started setting goals.

My very first mentor was my grandfather. He was in the Black Panthers. He was an avid volunteer for the YMCA and used to take me to YMCA events. He went back to school in his 30s to get his bachelor's, master's, and PhD.

If I could go back, I would have listened to my mom and found that person in life that was doing something positive a lot earlier.

Find what drives you. I've always had a helping heart. I figured out I wanted to teach. Now, I'm looking at a larger scope of helping communities.

Find someone that's doing something positive, be courageous enough to not fall into the popular thing to do. You may find you'll be more likely to succeed following a path that you may not see currently.

***He's passionate and helps his community.***

*- Garrison Kemp, age 16*

***He inspired me to never give up.***

*- Raymeir Williams, age 17*

***He made me appreciate my surroundings and the people I look up to.***

*- Ronald Wiggins, age 16*



## MARK SANDERS

*Born 1959 — Funeral Home Associate, House of Law Inc.*

*Interview by Cameron Tarrant, Daivon Stephens, Tamar Patillo*

*Excerpts from Track 2*

I've lived in Penn Hills all my life. People were friendly, no violence. I was a middle child of ten. I was quiet and really observant. My mother was a pastor and my father owned his own trucking business. I started working for my father when I was 10 years old. My mentors were the older truck drivers. After thirty-nine years, I decided to retire.

***He taught me that there is a Higher Power  
and, if you fail, keep trying.***

*-Cameron Tarrant, age 17*

***He taught us to have life goals  
and to keep striving.***

*- Daivon Stephens, age 16*

***He's a good role model that I'll turn to.***

*- Tamar Patillo, age 14*

I found myself not knowing what to do which led me into drugs. I found myself homeless. I reached out to my brother and he said, "We're going to send you to rehab." A pastor knew a facility called Northwest Mission Bible Training Center in Portland, Oregon. This was the best thing I ever did.

If you believe in God, He has a way of opening doors for you and letting you see that it's never too late to try something new. He has saved me from a world of trouble.

I started working as a day care teacher. After that, my daughter was killed. I asked God, "God, help me. I don't know what to do." I enhanced my feelings about the day care center. That took the pain of not having my child. I poured my energy into that.

Learn how to move on. My favorite saying is, "turn the page". Find out what a man is. Age does not make a man. I didn't realize I was a man until I was in my 40s. Right now I think I'm doing what a man should do.



## COACH CRAIG WILLIAMS

*Born 1971 — Retired, US Navy;*

*President, Penn Hills Midget Football Association*

*Interview by Miguel Jackson & Cameron Griffin*

*Excerpts from Track 3*

Growing up was rough. My mother passed away when I was two years old of a drug overdose. My father was a heroin addict. I had to fend for myself. I had a younger sister I had to look out for. I was a man before I was a boy. When I was six, my father went away to federal prison. I didn't see him again until I was sixteen.

I went through a lot of tough times, going days without eating. I would have to steal to eat. I kept going to the same store where the guy would just let me walk out. I found out years later my grandfather was taking the guy money, telling him, "Whatever my grandson wants, just give it to him." My grandfather was one I didn't want to disappoint. I was like the son he never had.

The military stripped me down and built me back up. My first five and a half years, I was on the *USS Flint*. I got to see a lot of different countries that I would never get to see if I wasn't in the military.

My kids inspired me to become the person that I am today. Not just my kids, even kids outside of my home. I like them to see what type of person I am.

Make sure the things that you choose are your own choices and good choices. The life that's put in front of you, that's the path that God intended for you. How you deal with it is up to you. You're gonna make some mistakes. Just know how to get back on the straight and narrow. I'm not perfect. There's only one perfect person. I have my vices, but I try to do well for myself and I try to do right by others.

***He's a good role model. He had a hard childhood and overcame it.***

*- Miguel Jackson, age 14*

***He inspires me by helping kids in the community.***

*- Cameron Griffin, age 16*



## COACH LOU RASH

*Born 1960 — Science Teacher, Allegheny Intermediate Unit*

*Interview by Cameron Tarrant, Daivon Stephens & Tamar Patillo*

*Excerpts from Track 4*

I grew up in Mississippi. There was a black side of town and a white side of town. I went to the black high school. During my high school years, all the teachers looked like me, so it helped with confidence. My mother made sure that I'd go to church and be respectful of people. The day that I surrendered to God might have been the best day of my life.

***He told us to push through our struggles.***

*- Cameron Tarrant, age 17*

***It's inspiring that he wants to help the community.***

*- Daivon Stephens, age 16*

***He helps a lot of people. I could turn to him in the future.***

*- Tamar Patillo, age 14*

When I first started playing ball, I wanted to go to the NFL. After I achieved the goal of playing professional sports, I started working at Shuman Detention Center with troubled youth. I decided to go back to school and become a teacher. I've been teaching for the last twenty-four years.

I had some great coaches. Those guys were like fathers to me. From each one, you took a little something. I started coaching when I was in college. The best part about being a coach is seeing players develop confidence. I love to win, but I teach kids you have won when you have given it your all and your best.

You have to be a champion of joy. You have the ability to rise above every situation. You're going to get knocked down, but get up and keep working. If it doesn't work out, you haven't lost anything because you developed a habit of working.



## COACH ROBERT KEMP

*Born 1965 — Retired Sales/Marketing, Comcast;*

*Vice President, Penn Hills Midget Football Association*

*Interview by Cameron Griffin, Hezron Omune & Jeremy Hamilton*

*Excerpts from Track 5*

I've lived in Penn Hills for twenty years. I was raised by my mother and my aunt. My father didn't have much time for me and my two brothers. But it didn't seem like we lacked for anything because my mom and my aunt worked hard to make up for it. You'll get your biggest support from your family and biggest heartbreak from your family. You'll learn tough love.

When you get older you'll realize it's because they care about you.

The guy that lived three or four houses down from me, an old Italian guy, showed me anyone can be a mentor to you regardless of race. I blew a tire on my bike and he fixed it for me. It helped me to learn to trust other people.

College prepared me to problem solve, but it didn't prepare me for the real world. My goal was originally to go to law school. An assignment was to witness a court case. I came to the realization that what you see on *Law & Order* isn't how it goes downtown. What I got from that experience was if you have money, you can be innocent.

Practice self-discipline. Respect knowledge. Find out things for yourself. Respect the law. Carry yourself in a way that makes others want to respect you.

***I can relate to things he went through like growing up with siblings.***

- Cameron Griffin, age 16

***I felt a connection because his mom raised three kids just like my mom. We both see them working hard to give us what's best.***

- Hezron Omune, age 14

***He played Division I sports in college. I also want to pursue that dream.***

- Jeremy Hamilton, age 17



## COACH BRANDON IFILL

*Born 1991 — Coach, Penn Hills High School*

*Interview by Ronald Wiggins, Raymeir Williams & Garrison Kemp*

*Excerpts from Track 6*

I grew up in a two-parent home. I was raised by my mom, dad, aunts, uncles, grandparents. My biggest mentor is my father.

I attended the University of Pittsburgh because I was offered a full scholarship to play football and continue my academic career. I majored in criminal justice.

***When I feel like I can't turn to anybody else, I know I can turn to him because he's already been through it.***

*- Ronald Wiggins, age 16*

***He's a good role model because he is respectful, hard working, and a good leader.***

*- Raymeir Williams, age 17*

***I want to be a coach just like him.***

*- Garrison Kemp, age 16*

College was a little chaotic. I had to manage my time between playing football full-time, being a student full-time, and trying to have a social life, too. But it was great. I wouldn't change it for the world.

I coach football and track and field. The best part of coaching is when you see a person who's made a mistake and you help them correct that mistake.

Each trial and tribulation made me a better person, made me stronger, made me tougher and, ultimately, got me closer to God.

I want to be remembered as a selfless person. I put other people's priorities before mine and do my all to be a great example to other men or boys.

My advice would be to be yourself, focus on your academics. Don't try to be something that you are not. Do what's right.



## RON GRAHAM

*Born 1958 — Principal, Allegheny Intermediate Unit*

*Interview by Miguel Jackson & Cameron Jeffries*

*Excerpts from Track 7*

I've lived in the community for thirty years. My children went to Penn Hills High School, participated in sports. I was a minister with Second Baptist Church.

I lived in Garfield. Raised by my mother, single parent. Brother and sister in the home. Growing up in a single family, you tend to hold true to your family roots and stay close as a family.

When I was growing up, there were people shooting, fights, drug activities, break-ins. Friends who I grew up with were killed because of choices they made. Athletics kept me pretty clean because I was busy.

When I was in high school, there was an administrator that always stood by me. Since he was a strong advocate for me, I felt that when I got into a position that I should do the same.

I was a scholarship athlete at Tuskegee University in Alabama. When I went there, it changed how I looked at the plight of segregation. There is systematic racism that takes place within communities, schools, regions. The lesson that I learned was that it's not that people are evil, it's that they have adapted to the norms of their environment.

There's consequences for actions. If you mess up, regroup and walk through whatever comes with it. If you're overwhelmed, get worthy council. There's always time to recover. Trust your path and open your ears. Keep an open heart.

*I like how he overcame all of his struggles  
as a kid.*

- Miguel Jackson, age 14

*He taught me to never give up and to keep  
fighting for what I want.*

- Cameron Jeffries, age 17



## ERIC HARRIS

*Born 1976 — Senior Loan Officer, Citizens Bank*

*Interview by Azeiryus Britt, Darrell Holloway & Dominic Burden*

*Excerpts from Track 8*

I grew up in Westchester County, New York. It was a very diverse area. I had an upbringing where I could understand all cultures. It's allowed me to understand and be tolerant of different lifestyles.

Family is extremely important. Growing up, when I thought about starting a family, I made a promise to make sure I was there for my kids. That's important,

***He taught me some very helpful things  
about college and life.***

*- Azeiryus Britt, age 16*

***We have a lot in common. I can use the  
advice he gave me in my own life.***

*- Darrell Holloway, age 17*

***He said that education is the key.***

*- Dominic Burden, age 14*

especially being a black man. There are not that many positive role models portrayed in the media for us. There've been quite a few influential people in my life. One of them was my sixth grade teacher, the only black male teacher I ever had. He instilled in me that to succeed you have to get your education. You have to read. Don't be a follower. Be a leader. Get your education. Try to improve yourself every day.

As I got older, I realized some of the ills with society. I wanted to be there for my kids so I could teach them what was right and wrong. Now that I'm older, I see certain things. Issues like the glass ceiling, how people perceive black people differently, how the country was built, how money was made in this country.

We can overcome those ills that were previously done to us that have a lasting effect from generation to generation. Do your own research to understand how this country works and what you need to do to make it a better place for when your kids are here.



## WALTER J. BENTLEY II

*Born 1957 — Journeyman Wireman, IBEW Local Union No. 5*

*Interview by Cameron Jeffries, Hezron Omune & Jeremy Hamilton*

*Excerpts from Track 9*

I had a great childhood. I grew up in a neighborhood in Penn Hills called Lincoln Park. We could walk to a neighborhood store. We had a neighborhood school. It was before integration. Our school was mostly African American. After school, you got your homework done and you were outside playing until the streetlights came on.

I look up to my father immensely. My mother and father raised four kids. We never wanted for anything. They built a brand new home in Penn Hills as a young couple. My father worked a full-time job and jitneyed on the side. He's still here for me to look up to and confide in.

By the time I hit 8th grade, I thought I wanted to become an accountant. I ended up going to CCAC for my college classes. I didn't like the economics part of accounting, so I left college and had the opportunity to become an electrician.

I was always fascinated with Christmas lights. Ever since I could remember, I always helped decorate. To have a job working with electricity and get paid to decorate is remarkable.

My struggles were my skin—people telling me I couldn't do what I had dreams to do. When I first became an apprentice, I was told, "there will never be a black officer in the Local 5." I'm the first. I became a teller, an examining board member and was an executive board member for over ten years.

***He taught me to never give up on  
what I want.***

- Cameron Jeffries, age 17

***I hope to be like him when I get older.***

- Hezron Omune, age 14

***He worked hard to graduate  
and I'm doing the same.***

- Jeremy Hamilton, age 17



## ERIC "COOP" COOPER

*Born 1981 — Sports Coordinator, Penn Hills YMCA*

*Interview by Dominic Burden, Azeiryus Britt & Darrell Holloway*

*Excerpts from Track 10*

I was born and raised in Penn Hills. My childhood was great. We had a lot of kids in our neighborhood. We played kickball and football in the street. When I was thirteen, I travelled with a group of thirty kids to England, Scotland, and Ireland. We got to stay with a host family. Seeing how things are similar and different was an experience I'll never forget.

***He told me to do what I love  
and to do it right.***

*- Dominic Burden, age 14*

***He's a positive role model and I aspire to  
be like him some day.***

*- Azeiryus Britt, age 16*

***He taught me not to judge people. You  
never know what a person goes through.***

*- Darrell Holloway, age 17*

When working with kids, you can see the ones that are getting picked on. I try to talk to the ones that are bullying. Sometimes they'll open up to you and you realize that there's a lot of things going on in their lives. I try not to judge.

I grew up in the Penn Hills YMCA. I participated in our programs. I thought it was something positive in my life, so I'm trying to instill that positivity into the youth of today. I'm blessed to have some of the things that I have and I try to give back. I like being on the front lines to have a direct influence on children's lives. Sometimes people lose touch as they get further up the chain.

I think success is if you find something you love to do and do it well. Be independent; stop trying to be a follower. Don't let your peers influence you in a negative way. Find a positive role model in your life. Someone you can talk to. Find somebody that can tell you the truth about yourself, somebody who's not always going to say yes to you.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible by the African American Men and Boys Initiative of The Heinz Endowments with support from:



and the August Wilson Center, Bistro To Go & Company, *New Pittsburgh Courier* and *Urban Media Today*.

The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the individuals represented and do not necessarily reflect those of The Heinz Endowments, Penn Hills Midget Football Association, Penn Hills Varsity Football, Penn Hills YMCA, or any other collaborating organization.

## TRACK LISTING

1. THOMAS WALLACE
2. MARK SANDERS
3. COACH CRAIG WILLIAMS
4. COACH LOU RASH
5. COACH ROBERT KEMP
6. COACH BRANDON IFILL
7. RON GRAHAM
8. ERIC HARRIS
9. WALTER J. BENTLEY II
10. ERIC "COOP" COOPER

YOUTH REFLECTIONS APPEAR ON TRACKS 11-20.



