

HILL DISTRICT VOICES

Vol. II

CROSSING FENCES

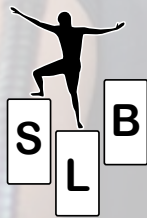
*CONNECTING AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN AND BOYS
THROUGH THE ORAL TRADITION*

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Crossing Fences is a project of SLB Radio Productions, Inc.
Hill District Voices Vol. II is based on interviews collected by students at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in the Hill District.



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 2018, SLB Radio Productions, Inc. (SLB) convened a group of students in partnership with Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in the Hill District and The Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern PA. 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 the Hill District 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 Dakota Garilli of The Mentoring Partnership, Camden Yandel, Yvette Hamilton, Becky Mason, James Gales and everyone at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh Hill District. Additional audio and photos are available at crossingfences.org.

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 or 412.586.6300.



TERREL WILLIAMS

Born 1981 — Education Liaison, The Kingsley Association

Interview by DaJuan Davis, Jr., Robert Johnson &

Donovan McKeever

Excerpts from Track 1

I was born and raised in the Hill. I grew up in the projects. Then, moving from the projects to Bloomer Way, it was a slum. My street had heroin addicts, crackheads, prostitutes. I grew up around bullies and tough guys. It was a good childhood, but it was a little too rough. I wouldn't want my daughter or my son to go through stuff I went through.

I did not like not having friends in middle school. Once I got to Schenley High School I put time and effort into molding my image. I was trying to figure out, *What is a Hill District dude?* The academics part was easy. I didn't put in effort. I could have been a 4.0 student if I really focused.

I went to the University of Pittsburgh in 2000. I didn't finish. I had to wander around and work jobs for years and years. I finally found a way to get back in school. I went to CCAC and I knocked out an associates degree in education. Then, I went to Carlow. I have a degree in theology. Mistakes I made contributed to some of the greatest things I have. Ultimately, my goal is to either be a professor or teacher.

I had my child last April. Everything I do now is based upon, *Will this hurt or help my baby?* It's important to be a positive black man to your daughter. That sets her up for whoever she might date in the future and her perception of black men. I don't want to destroy whatever perception she has.

He's a good storyteller. I want to be able to tell my story like him.

- DaJuan Davis, Jr., age 11

I learned that life is like an adventure and there's no way you can just give up.

- Robert Johnson, age 16

I could listen to him tell stories all day.

- Donovan McKeever, age 14



GLENN GRAYSON, JR.

Born 1986 — Community Organizer

Interview by Robert Johnson, Donovan McKeever & Clay Everett

Excerpts from Track 2

I was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I grew up in a small town called Salisbury. It was predominately black. I'd never been in the city. I moved here, I didn't know anybody. North Carolina and Pittsburgh are completely different. There's so many more black people down south. You get to see more people that look like ourselves doing great things.

I hope to have experiences like his.

- Robert Johnson, age 16

He always thinks of his kids first.

- Donovan McKeever, age 14

He's always traveling.

I hope to travel, too.

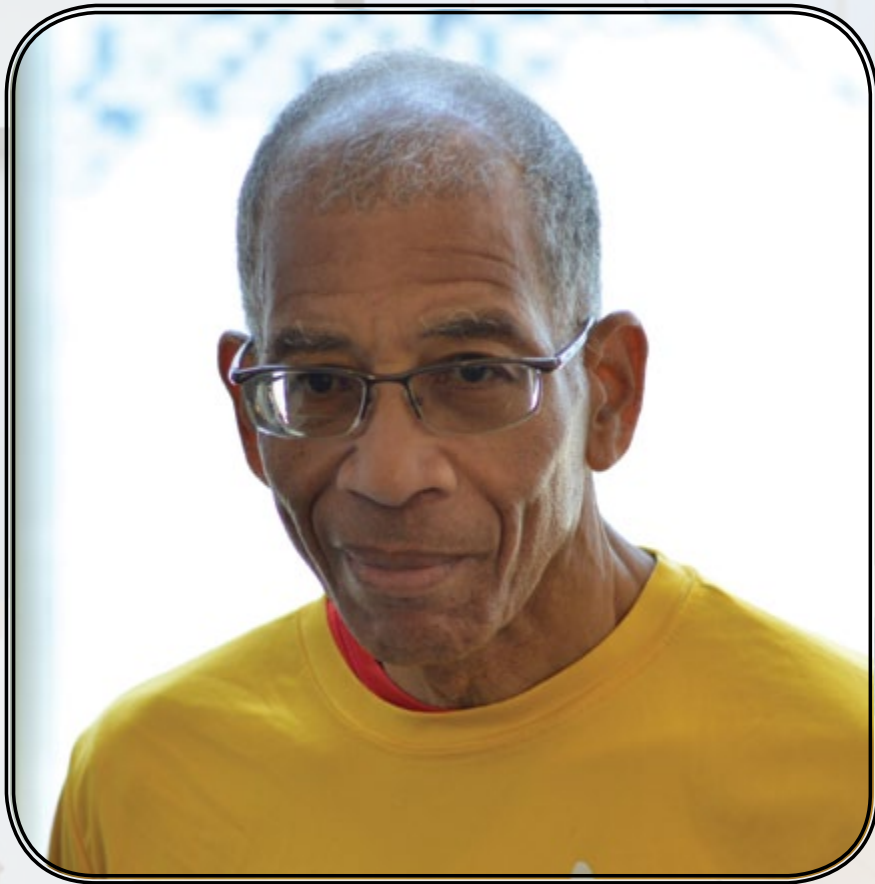
-Clay Everett, age 14

I went to Schenley High School. I went to Winston-Salem State University. I studied business marketing. I did have a high school sweetheart. Freshman year of college I had a baby with her. I wasn't prepared to be a father at the time.

My brother was a freshman at Hampton University. He came home for the first time. A guy shot through a party. He killed my brother. Do I wish I had my brother back? Yes. I have to move forward to what I know and what I can control and go from there.

After college I came back to Pittsburgh. I had my daughter. I wanted to make sure I was around for her. I started working at the YWCA in Homewood. After that, the Bank of New York Mellon. I spent some time in New York. I came back and that's when I landed my job that I'm currently doing, which is a community organizer. That has fulfilled me on so many levels.

You might fail and it's alright. It's how you pick up from that failure.



ROLAND FORD

Born 1948 — Founder, Dance and Be Fit; Health Advocate

Interview by Brandon Strong, Jr. & Cassius Plummer

Excerpts from Track 3

I was born on Wiley Avenue. I grew up in an area they call Sugar Top, up on Milwaukee Street. I have six siblings.

It seems like the whole neighborhood used to always be at our house. My dad opened up our home to his siblings. There were fifteen children at one point in time in that house. Both my mother and father were

active in the community. I had good role models in my parents. I was blessed that a lot of people mentored me or were positive examples.

Being involved in athletics helped me with discipline, kept me out of a lot of problems. As I got into retirement, I reinvented myself. I have a company that I founded where we are directing, coaching and helping people to develop a healthier lifestyle.

I grew up in a very turbulent time. There were a lot of civil rights issues. That did a lot to shape my development. I remember as a child that there was a swimming pool. We'd have to defend ourselves when we were leaving because there would be fights. It was a racial thing. I went to Columbia University, we closed the school down because we were protesting lack of faculty, lack of courses. There were a lot of breakthroughs that were going on at that time to get more doors opened.

There's a way for you to win. You may not see the whole path, but begin taking steps and moving towards it. You'll figure it out along the way.

***He ran track and did cross-country
and I did also.***

- Brandon Strong, Jr., age 17

***He taught me to eat healthier,
drink more water, and be
more active in the community.***

- Cassius Plummer, age 18



DONALD MCKEEVER

Born 1965 — Retired Educator

Interview by Brandon Strong, Jr., Robert Johnson & Clay Everett

Excerpts from Track 4

I grew up in a pretty rough neighborhood in Detroit, but the neighborhood was tight knit. There was a sense of community that kept us all safe.

Education was always stressed in my family as being the most important thing that we have. My mother's older sister was a principal. I was brought up around educators. I was the first person in my immediate

I learned that if you're on time, you're late.

- Brandon Strong, Jr., age 17

It's cool that he was at the top of all of his classes during his years in school.

- Robert Johnson, age 16

He wants kids to communicate and be more involved in business.

- Clay Everett, age 14

family that got a college degree. I went away to school at seventeen. I'd never been out of the city of Detroit by myself. It taught me how to become independent.

I got a baseball scholarship at Langston University in Oklahoma. I played there for two years. I transferred to Jacksonville State and finished my baseball career there. I played against Bo Jackson, probably the best natural athlete I've ever seen in my life. In college I threw him out. As a freshman, I hit .425.

Later, I taught for 23 years. I'm still trying to think of ways to get kids interested in how important it is to educate yourself. I have four children. Every morning I wake up is because I want to make sure that they are okay when I'm not here. They keep me stable.

Arm yourself with education. If you're working towards something, you're not going to get anything out of it if you don't put the time in it.



JAMES GALES

Born 1981 — Security Guard, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

Interview by DaJuan Davis, Jr., Cassius Plummer

& Erneez Campbell

Excerpts from Track 5

I'm from the Hill District, born and raised. My mom and dad raised four kids. It was a little tough, but we made it through. Me and my brother hang everyday. He's my best friend. I have two sisters. Everybody looks out for each other and takes care of each other's kids.

My dad was in my life. He was my mentor. He used to take me to work with him. He used to work at a pizza spot. I would sit there, play games, eat slices of pizza and fall asleep at the table.

I struggled with school. I wanted to play sports and do everything else. I wasn't stupid, I just didn't like to sit there for hours. I got through it, but I did not like school. I always liked music. It was something about music—the way it made me feel. Music was like a getaway to me.

My kids are the real reason I am the way I am today. If it wasn't for my kids, I probably wouldn't be here. My kids are my world. I have two boys, two girls. I'm about to be a granddad. If you can, wait a while to have kids. When I was sixteen, I was a dad.

Stay focused and try to stay away from as much negativity as you can. The negativity that does come, try to not let it get to you because it's going to happen. Work hard and stay humble.

He always makes the kids feel comfortable at the library.

- Cassius Plummer, age 18

He makes people laugh and smile.

- Erneez Campbell, age 12

When you talk to him, you feel like you're talking to your best friend.

- DaJuan Davis, Jr., age 11



JUSTIN LAING

Born 1970 — Principal, Hillombo LLC

Interview by DaJuan Davis, Jr. & Robert Johnson

Excerpts from Track 6

I was born in Boston and I grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland. In all my time growing up I never saw anything more than a fist fight. Never knew anybody that was shot. That was never a risk.

I applied to five schools. I got into three: Rutgers, Pitt, Drew. I didn't have good grades, but I knew

He inspired me to be an entrepreneur.

- DaJuan Davis, Jr., age 11

I don't usually read chapter books, but I might give the books he listed a chance.

- Robert Johnson, age 16

I had good SAT scores. I knew that being a black boy with good SAT scores, I would still get into a school that I wanted to go to. I wanted to go to a school with black people. I came to Pitt. I had a new environment and a new set of rules. By the time I was graduating, I had a child on the way. His mother was in college, so I needed to find health insurance. My fraternity brother knew someone at the county and said, *You could apply for this job as probation officer.* I got the job.

I work as a consultant. People ask me to help them think through certain problems. I love it. I'm at work right now in my t-shirt and my jeans. I can work in my house, in my office, in my car. Having your own company—I find it interesting. I get to wear a *Black Panther* shirt to work!

Read black authors. Watch black movies. Listen to a wide variety of black music. Be curious about your culture and contribute to it. You can contribute better if you're learning more about it. Try to look for what it is that people want you to know. Get off the beaten path and find your own curiosities and interests.



CLIFF SIMON

Born 1986 — Site Coordinator, Jeron X. Grayson Center

Interview by DaJuan Davis, Jr. & Shemar Tinker

Excerpts from Track 7

I grew up in the Hill District. I was born up Sugar Top. For a couple years we moved to the Northside. We ended up moving back to the Hill. I grew up well, my mom and dad were supportive. I lived very humbly, I didn't ask for much. I wasn't a spoiled kid.

I love the culture of the Hill. We just have our own thing. The way that we talk, the way that we look—

we're very confident, we're unique. There's no place like the Hill. The people that I grew up with, we all lived around each other. We're all friends to this day.

I went to CCAC and then I did a semester at Clarion for football. Then I went back to CCAC and finished my associate's in liberal arts and science. I ended up getting my degree in business management, the focus being marketing, at Point Park. I just had a baby girl, who I love dearly. Taking care of family, it's another responsibility under my belt. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Don't be content. Try to get out of your comfort zone. As black men and young men, we have a lot of temptations. It's all about avoiding temptation and hearing stories and learning from other people's stories to know you don't have to do that. Keep your head high. Don't feed into the stereotypes. Hold yourself accountable, because what you put into the universe will all come out.

I like that he's not afraid to share his opinion.

- DaJuan Davis, Jr., age 11

He motivates the community by bringing our people together.

- Shemar Tinker, age 18



DR. ANDRE SAMUEL

Born 1971 — President & CEO, The Citizen Science Lab

Interview by Clay Everett & Donovan McKeever

Excerpts from Track 8

I was born in Germany. My father was black. He was stationed in the army at the time. My mother was a German woman. I was four when we left Germany to come to the United States. There was a lot of turmoil. My parents were both addicts and alcoholics. I was abandoned by my parents and adopted by my father's legal wife and raised in Washington D.C.

He's a scientist. I'd like to get into the field of science.

- Donovan McKeever, age 14

His childhood was hard and he still found a way to do the things he wanted to do.

- Clay Everett, age 14

Right after high school I went to Tuskegee University. I wanted to be a veterinarian. I had a reputation on campus for doing some white-collar type crime. I ended up getting caught by the police. Between the time I stopped going to Tuskegee and the time I went back to school, I got all the demons out. I got addicted to drugs, I ended up being homeless. I decided to kick the habit and enroll into a detox program.

I transferred my credits from Tuskegee to the University of the District of Columbia. That's where I finished my bachelor's of science. I eventually made it to graduate school and started working on my Ph.D.

When I first moved to Pittsburgh in 2004, the first place I lived was the Hill District. My big goal is to take what I'm doing now, which is running The Citizen Science Lab, and making it national.

I have two kids. It is a great experience. It's an emotional experience. Another reason why I was able to go through what I went through as a youth was so I would know how to stop this cycle when it was time for me to start raising kids.



CAMDEN YANDEL

Born 1992 — Library Assistant, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

Interview by Cassius Plummer & Shemar Tinker

Excerpts from Track 9

I grew up in East Hills. I was raised primarily by my mother. My parents got divorced when I was two. I got to see my dad twice a week. I played a lot of sports, had a lot of friends. I had pretty bad grades in school, but all in all it was a good experience.

My mom was a special ed teacher for almost thirty years. She would come home after work, and work.

We'd do our homework together. I saw how great she felt making a difference in youths' lives and I wanted to do that. I always wanted to make a difference like my mom did. I work with teenagers at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

I had a teacher named Ms. Hetrick. I never thought about going to art school until she told me that I should. I ended up going to St. Vincent College and studied graphic design. I got to meet people that thought differently. I also met people that were like me. My goals moving forward are to become a librarian for Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. I'd have to get a master's in library science. Another goal is to publish my own comics.

I've seen changes throughout the neighborhood. I think it's always been a positive place. I felt like a part of it instantly. My whole family is from here.

Talk to older people. Get to know the history of your neighborhood. Walk around the Hill District. Find places you might not have known about. Tell your friends about those places.

He's a great mentor.

- Cassius Plummer, age 18

I want to motivate youth to become better leaders like he does.

- Shemar Tinker, age 18



KEVIN McNAIR

*Born 1987 — Cofounder & Executive Director, 1Nation Mentoring
Interview by Erneze Campbell, Malzay Grant & Clay Everett
Excerpts from Track 10*

My childhood, it was great. Although we didn't have a lot, I never saw that we needed anything. I was able to be a kid and enjoy being free. As we got into middle school, I saw the changes in our neighborhood. I never had a positive male role model that lived around me. A lot of us didn't have father figures, we were trying to figure it out.

He is inspiring because he likes to help young people.

- Erneze Campbell, age 12

He makes me want to come back to my community and give back what I learned.

- Malzay Grant, age 13

He addresses everyone as "King". It boosts your confidence.

- Clay Everett, age 14

In high school I started hustling. Although it was easy for me to go to school and pass tests, I was still in the streets. Once I got to a certain age I realized that we didn't have everything that everyone else had. That made me want to be able to get things for myself. My mom wanted me to go to college. I didn't want to go. I actually got kicked out of school for hustling. That really shifted my life, so I went to Slippery Rock.

While at Slippery Rock, my cousin Jeron Grayson was killed at a house party. All the anger that I ever had growing up came out of me. My teacher was saying, *I know you were involved in gangs back in Charlotte and I know you were able to lead people to do the wrong thing, but what would it be like to lead people to do the right thing?* I created my own non-profit.

I run an in-school mentoring program. Anything I can do for anybody who is positive, I'm here to help. And anybody who is lost, I don't write them off.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible by The Heinz Endowments with support from:



and Bistro To Go & Company, *New Pittsburgh Courier*, Propel Schools and Jonas Chaney, Community Affairs Director WPXI-TV.

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

TRACK LISTING

1. TERREL WILLIAMS
2. GLENN GRAYSON, JR.
3. ROLAND FORD
4. DONALD MCKEEVER
5. JAMES GALES
6. JUSTIN LAING
7. CLIFF SIMON
8. DR. ANDRE SAMUEL
9. CAMDEN YANDEL
10. KEVIN MCNAIR

YOUTH REFLECTIONS APPEAR ON TRACKS 11-20.

Hear the original interviews and reflections from these and more than 350 other men and boys at crossingfences.org.

For a CD containing these interviews and reflections, additional copies, or information about conducting a project in your own community, contact SLB Radio Productions, Inc. at slb@slbradio.org or 412.586.6300.

