

**Interviewee:** Tom McKnight

**Interviewer:** Kayla Scott

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**Transcriber:** Kayla Scott

**Abstract:** Mr. Tom McKnight was born in New York on June 24, 1945. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the military. Before and after enlistment, Mr. McKnight pursued the dream of being a pro baseball player. Unfortunately, this dream came close to being a reality several times without ever being successful. After serving in the military, Mr. McKnight became involved with UNICEF and served in multiple leadership roles on overseas missions. When his mother passed away, Mr. McKnight returned to the states and endeavored to trace his family roots. In between UN missions, the journey to find answers led him on numerous trips across the United States and eventually to Alabama. He decided to move to Tuscumbia, Alabama, where he had managed to find some of his family. He has become actively involved in the community as a member of many organizations, including as the leader of the Tennessee Valley Historical Society and the Historic Landmark Commission in Colbert County.

**Kayla Scott:** This is Kayla Scott and I am at the [Muscle] Shoals National Heritage Area with Mr. Tom McKnight. It is February 2, 2015. If you would, Mr. McKnight, please state your full name, when and where you were born.

**Tom McKnight:** My name's Tom McKnight; I was born June 24, 1945. Born in New York.

**Kayla Scott:** And what were the names of your parents and any siblings that you had?

**Tom McKnight:** Well, I actually had a couple of stepfathers, siblings ... really didn't discover any until about maybe four years ago.

**Kayla Scott:** OK, so, you were born in New York. How did you end up in Alabama?

**Tom McKnight:** (Laughs) Yeah, well, that's a, kind of an amazing revelation for me as well. Well, I think, I think as one ... and there's a spiritual component to my story, and my existence. Born and raised in New York, but it's kind of interesting that pain, loss of family, will give one an opportunity to transmute a negative experience into something positive. Now what I mean by that is that I had been born and raised in New York; you never know as you proceed along the course of life's highway just what's in store for you. Life is full of freeze-frame moments and each one of those, I think, you know, are basically freeze-frame snapshots that if you put them on a decision tree you can actually plot, or at least I could, plot exactly what events at a particular time resulted in my branching off into something else. For instance, you're born into an

environment of poverty and deprivation and dysfunctional environments. And one would tend to think that those boundaries are maybe perpetual? OK. But ...

**Kayla Scott:** They don't have to be.

**Tom McKnight:** I beg pardon?

**Kayla Scott:** They don't have to be.

**Tom McKnight:** They don't have to be, this is true. This is a matter, I think, of self-discovery. There's something that everyone has the opportunity along life's highway to look at, evaluate, and know that those are not perpetual issues, they're not virtual issues. But I think that even from the moment of my birth, OK, 1945, I had a ten percent chance of surviving, because I was born three to three and a half months premature.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh my.

**Tom McKnight:** So basically, whereas the physical plane, medical doctors said 90 percent, he's not going to make it, well, God is good all the time, and therefore, I think the Master Doctor saw to it that, that there was going to be some struggles and challenges, but he's going to guide you through it. OK, so therefore that's the way that life has been: full of struggles and challenges, but opportunities for growth ... physical, emotional, spiritual. And this is pretty much what the blueprint that has guided my life knowingly and unknowingly. As we transverse, you know, walk down the highway of life, you get opportunities to really take those snapshots, see where you're at, and learn from those experiences and consequences. I think of divine intervention, for me, that I got an opportunity to go beyond boundaries. Boundaries of a neighborhood. Boundaries of a borough, of a city, of a state and actually to cross international boundaries, and hence as you have reviewed from my curriculum vita, my resume, nineteen countries, mostly engaged in United Nations operations in conflict zones, where you get to see the worst of what humanity can levy on one another. And there are no boundaries when it comes to soulless behaviors, no matter where you go or what continent you will find that human kind just has a unique way of tapping into the worst parts of their nature. However, get an opportunity to parachute, metaphorically, into an armament and to bring some peace, harmony, love, some relief to someone who, as we sit here in this moment, be it the Darfur in western Sudan, southwestern Sudan, or other places ... OK, there is someone who woke up this morning, witnessed this morning's sunrise, with no guarantee that they would witness this evening's sunset much less tomorrow's next sunrise. So whatever the twists and turns of fate, of God's plan, that has enabled me to move through life and to enjoy and to actually get into, find my niche. And I didn't think that my niche was humanitarian stuff, although there's always been an interest in foreign places and people. Again, it comes back to a, I think a choice of a, being presented with an "if" or "or." My goal in life, I wanted to go into pro baseball. And everything was moving in that direction. And the day that I enrolled in the military, right after high school -- because basically I had to get away from the home environment -- I didn't know that the coach

who had seen something in me and decided that he was going to be my trainer and actually teach me how to pitch ... up until that moment I thought I was a pitcher only to discover that I was a thrower, and there's a big difference, because with Mr. Reese ... I think he must have played in the Negro leagues way back in the day, because he knew everything about baseball. Everything. And it was all technique. By the time he got done with me, if you got more than five hits in a ball game, that was a good day. As it turned out the day that I go into the military and had gotten sworn in, well, there were so many recruits going to basic training that there wasn't enough planes to take them down. So the first batch went that day and the second batch, that's the batch that I was in, went the following day. So I had a day to kill. So I called Mr. Reese and asked if he was going to be having a practice some place and he said, "No." And I told him what I had did, which he wasn't too happy about. And he said, "Well, why don't you go down to the Braves tryout." This was the Milwaukee Braves at the time and I said "Where?" And he said, "The field just outside of Yankee Stadium in New York." "But, Coach, that's invitational only." And he said, "Well, go anyway." And I said, "OK." I got off the subway and stopped by the stadium, the field to see what was going on. And at the time they were running time trials from home to first so I jumped in a cab and had the guy drive like a madman to my house and busted through the door, "Mom, where's my uniform?" She said, "In the washing machine. What's happening?" And I said, "Look, where's my uniform? I'll tell you later." "It's in the washing machine." Fortunately she hadn't turned on the wash cycle. Threw everything in my bag, back in the cab, down to, back down to the field. Signed up for the tryout. Well, when you have those major league tryouts there are marathon games because the scouts know exactly who it is they want to see and they have some great ball players hitting three-hundred-fifty-foot line drives like all day long. Finally they say, "McKnight." I say, "Yes." "Get out there, you're on the mound." So got on the mound, first three batters that I face I struck out. I had all these folks behind me in the batting cage and someone said, "Yank 'um!" And someone said, "No, leave him in." They let me pitch to eleven straight batters. I struck out eight of the eleven and the other three never got it out of the infield. So that was almost like a half a game of perfect no-run, no-hit baseball. Then after that, went out to the left field, someone signaled, I hit my cutoff, and that was basically the end of the tryout. Sitting in the locker room, and the Braves scout, his name was Jo- Jo White, walks in, big tall guy, big wad of tobacco in the side of his jaw and he looks at me and says, "McKnight, right?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He looks at me and says, "You need a little more speed on your fastball before we take notice." That was like an out-of-body experience and I didn't have the common sense to tell him that I didn't throw any fastballs that day because I saw these guys clocking these line drives so I thought well, hey. And of course that's when I learned from Coach Reese that he had been grooming me for a tryout with the San Francisco Giants at the end of the season. But he never told me. Had he told me, I would have never enlisted in the Air Force.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh my!

**Tom McKnight:** Here's the thing. Here's the thing. Got in the Air Force, made the base team down in Mississippi, Keesler Air Force Base, and just as we were about to go on a road trip, I graduated from tech school and was going overseas, and I thought, what's the point, I might as well go ahead and go on mission and see what happens later. Served overseas, served in the military, got back home and said, "Now let me find Mr. Reese because I know I'm a little bit older, a little bit stronger. Majors bound." He died when I was in service.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh.

**Tom McKnight:** So every attempt to try and make a comeback ... went to a Kansas City Royal tryout, tore a hamstring on the time trial run, and that finished me for the rest of the season, actually. Then made the team of the Nathan's which is ... you're familiar with the Nathan's hotdog brand?

**Kayla Scott:** Yes.

**Tom McKnight:** The famous concession. They have a semi-pro team and Joe Pepitone of the New York Yankees, Joe Torre, who was one of my heroes, came up through that system, made that team. But at the time I was working with IBM and was involved in a company project and they had a basketball team. And they said, "Hey, Tom, listen, we're going to be short. Can you come down to the game? Last game of the season playoff." I said, "Yeah, OK, I'll be down." Suited up, got into the last thirty seconds of the game. We were losing and first pass my side, shot my finger out there and the next thing when I felt this pain, my right index finger was bent back at a 45-degree angle. Turned and I said, "Oh, I broke my finger." Snapped it back into place. The game was over. I'm supposed to pitch opening day the following morning on Saturday, so Coach Michael Letter, this guy was not happy with me. So anyway, so you know, with those repeated issues of just almost getting there and something finally dawned on me. "Lord, obviously this is not something that you've created me for. So I'm not going to fight you anymore. I realize my arms are too short to box with God. OK. So, hey, no muss, no muss. No more, no more. Wherever you lead me, then, uh, that's where, the way I'll go." So there's a freeze-frame snapshot moment. Another one in the military. On a, when the North Koreans captured the Naval ship De Pueblo in the .... I guess it was like the winter of, either winter '67 or just the turn of 1968 or early part of 1968. At that time I was assigned to a military base, Air Force base in Glasgow, Montana, so we were the retaliatory strike force that was to do the necessary and get our guys back. So moved all of our assets from Glasgow, Montana, to Okinawa and were all set for the operation. But then everything went through diplomatic channels. But there was a certain incident whereby another freeze-frame moment event where during the many hours of sleep deprivation, gearing up for this operation that something kind of caught my attention on a bulletin board. A cartoon of two buzzards sitting on a, on a branch. Someone had scratched out something in the caption, but basically it wasn't a very positive message, you know, and I thought, "Is this something I want to be part of for the rest of my life?" Now, when you are engaged in these things, you do what you have to do because that's

just the name of the game, OK? And I thought, “Well, what do you want to do with your life? Be part of something destructive or be part of something constructive?” It takes a long time to build something positive but it only takes seconds for it to go up in smoke. And that was another freeze-frame moment. I said, “OK, constructive.” So the strange twists and turns of life ... once you have surrendered to the Almighty and said, “Hey, OK, listen, your will be done.” It has resulted in my, in some strange twists and turns whereby I actually ended up in the UN system and got an opportunity to, you know, go overseas and that, once I got out there, I said, “Oh, hey, this is all right.” To be able to do what you love and get paid for it? It doesn’t get any better than that. I laid that whole background just to point out that “on earth as it is in Heaven,” you know, that there is a physical side and a spiritual side to things and, uh, you know, that’s basically knowingly and unknowingly, we are basically guided by life, OK? And it has given me the fulfillment I have been able to enjoy and by His grace and mercy to survive it all. Now, talk about the thing that brought me to Alabama. It was pain, tremendous sense of loss. Mom died in New York in 2004. OK, I was on a mission in Sudan, actually in the Darfur at the time. I got the news that she has passed, well, I came home and spent a few months on bereavement leave just tying everything up. But I always knew she wondered what happened to the family because our roots were here in northwest Alabama. And so I decided, hmm, in her memory let me take a couple years off to do the best I can in this late stage in life to try to put the family tree together. That was 2004, and that began my query into what, you know, who were our family and what’s the origins. Because here’s the thing. Many times in the African-American community, especially in the old-school generation who had this philosophy about kids that “children should be seen and not heard”? Whenever the elders got together, they cut their eyes at you and they didn’t have to say anything: they would cut their eyes at you and that was your signal. “Y’all go outside and play.” It’s not like today where you get your kids, you know, sitting up under elders’ armpits looking from one mouth to the other and hearing the gossip. Did not happen back then with the old folks. You go outside and play, you don’t need to hear this. OK. I think that there’s a kind of a utility in that sort of thing, but it’s also detrimental because you lose the beauty of knowing who you are. Those oral histories are critically important in establishing who you are and knowing what runs in, you know, through your veins spiritual as well as physical. OK? And so, and I can understand to some degree why they didn’t want to talk because of what they had to go through passed down from one generation to another. It’s not, there’s nothing prideful in, by admitting that, you know, that you’re descendants of slaves, and that’s your only basically claim to fame. So, that journey for me, which was part of a healing and reconciling, you know, opportunity, you know, to heal with the loss of Mom, by asking my uncle, “Who else was in the family?” And this is where I learned of the existence of Tuscumbia, Alabama. “Tuscumbiwhat? Where is that?” OK. And, uh, learned that, and I didn’t learn then, but I learned finally, subsequently learned who my great grandmother was here in Tuscumbia, Alabama. But going back to that, trying to find the unmarked grave of my grandmother Hattie Missouri Watkins who married my grandfather Samuel Snider. She’d been dead 68 years and, by talking to Uncle, who was in his 80s at the time, I was able actually to track down the cemetery of her burial and it took

me almost a couple of years to actually find her physical spot of burial. Having visited the cemetery -- the administration wasn't very good, but then again, the Lord puts certain people in your pathway that you need to guide you and to help you. And so that's the way this whole thing started. Whereby even though I had a burial number, nothing in the records, there was no logic in the burial patterns and section four of the cemetery versus section six of the cemetery and I thought, well, let me order the headstone anyway, before I go back overseas, which I did. And make sure that Grandmother Hattie Missouri Watkins Snider at least has a stone to prove that she was here, to give her that respect.

**Kayla Scott:** Right.

**Tom McKnight:** Well, took a whole lot of notes and a many trips back and forth to Maslin, Ohio, that's where she died. Anyway, when I came back to stateside, and I even made the trip down here because of a cousin who I had met, I didn't know she was a cousin at the time, met on the Internet, and kind of got me into the genealogy, she kind of planted the genealogy bug in me. So I had an opportunity to, you know, liaise with her, and some people locally. Chris Ozbirn, the president of the Secrets of the Past at the Franklin County Archives, was tremendously helpful during my bereavement visits to the states because she found an article in the *American Star*, which was the African-American newspaper edited by Professor George Washington Trenholm in Tuscumbia, and this was really the newspaper of the Muscle Shoals Missionary Baptist Association. What you find online is from issues from 1901 to 1911 or '12 and one would think that that would be the only, that's it. But actually, in that newspaper and the importance of it was that it was actually the talking drum in print for the African-American community, so if you wanted to know what was going on in the African-American community, that was the place, that was the paper. And if you were doing what you weren't supposed to be doing out there in the community, you got told on big time. Professor Trenholm didn't play, all right? He pulled no punches. The, uh, this is where I found out that my great-granddad, Rev. Fred W. Watkins, was a high-powered Baptist preacher back in the day. I thought, "Whoa. No one had ever really talked about him." I had heard a couple of stories. He was quite an interesting character. But you also have to understand the context of that and as I learned from what little bit I may have heard from Mom about great-grandfather Rev. Fred W. Watkins was actually, when I got involved in the research, was actually a composite of two generations of Rev. Fred W. Watkins. OK. And actually there were three generations of Rev. Fred W. Watkins. The first generation of Fred W. Watkins was actually Cherokee Indian. Born somewhere in 1811 in Tennessee. Don't know where, and because he was the guy that was constantly on the move. Why? Well, I figured out he's trying to avoid Trail of Tears removal. Talking about removal, 1838, he's born in, he's 25, he's in his 20s. Yeah, he's hiding out. But can you imagine finding yourself in the position ... in the American Indian culture, west represents death.

**Kayla Scott:** Right.

**Tom McKnight:** That's the direction of death. And so ... but can you imagine having to make the decision of whether or not you allow yourself to be banished into the western lands or fall into the slave system? Some choice. OK. So, hence, Cherokee Fred, first generation Rev. Fred W. Watkins, was, you know, was part and parcel how we got here and consequently you had the follow-up of successive generations. So, umm, having gone back overseas to finish up my assignment and decided that I would devote two years to trying to connect the family dots, I returned stateside 2005. Rented a house in Russellville, and in that first summer I drove 14,496 miles in eighty-six days trying to find family that I had never knew existed and had never met before, armed only with a couple of family stories, the beauty of oral histories, one physical address, and a GPS. As far as I'm concerned, because this is my story, it was all divine intervention guided experience because you find yourself at the right place at the right time, meeting the right person, laying your hands on a document that you would never have found in a million years and if I had had, I guess I kind of jokingly say now that if I ever had some proper training on how to do all this and really knew what I was doing, it might be awesome. (Laughs)

**Kayla Scott:** (Laughs)

**Tom McKnight:** But that first summer, my mission was to find Grandmother Hattie Missouri Watkins Snider. By that time the headstone that I ordered the previous year had arrived and I was told that, well, we have a marker here anyway. To make a long story short, I drove back up to Maslin, Ohio, from Russellville, and my goal was to try to get there in time before the administrative office closed, I failed. So, I got there Friday evening, went straight to Lowe's, bought a shovel and a rake and twine and wooden stakes and, uh, and checked into the Hampton Inn, which was my command post during my trips back and forth from New York to Maslin in 2004, trying to track down and find Grandmother. And so Saturday morning I was in the cemetery, back in the cemetery, and because someone had found a little small concrete marker with a number on it that looked like it could have conceivably been part of a trail that I needed to be on to find Grandmother Hattie, that was my, that was my start point. So from knowing the previous year of investigating documents and visiting funeral homes and getting anything I could lay my hands on, I knew that every burial was about two and a half feet apart, and I knew how long, so therefore that particular marker that was my starting point, every two and a half feet I had mapped out almost twenty or thirty yards, you know, stakes, you know, and then going up the hill did the same. Then I took my twine and actually made, tied it to the stakes and actually had a grid system. So I actually had my own little CSI operation going on in the back of the cemetery trying to find Grandmother. (Laughs) I wasn't, at the end of Saturday, I was hot, there were mosquitoes all over the place I was tired, I was hungry, I was thirsty. And going over to, because this was at the rear at the edge of the cemetery overlooking Potter's Field ... now I had been down to Potter's Field the week, I mean the year before, you know, because that was a part of the cemetery that had never been maintained, all of those people don't have, there was no records, and this and that, no one came, and even if you found a relative there, you weren't even

allowed, because of the strange bylaws, to even put a headstone in their memory. For some strange reason, don't know why.

**Kayla Scott:** Odd.

**Tom McKnight:** Anyway, been down there, there's snakes, and one time I saw a deer down there, but anyway, so I go on over to the edge of the cemetery overlooking Potter's little hill. I put my hand on this tree and I was just kind of thinking. Happen to look down and I saw just a little piece of concrete sticking up above the earth. Said, "Well, the burial line is up there. What's this, what's a marker doing way down here?" So I brushed it off and it revealed a number. Well, that number rang a bell, because the previous year I had learned that there were twin boys born 45 minutes of each other. These were the Finley babies, and one would have assumed the second one would have been buried over in section four of the cemetery. I said, "But I know these numbers. Why would they, why, I know that this is baby Finley. I found one of the babies. Twin boys. OK. Why would this marker be here and the other one over in section four?" As it turned out, they were funeralized by two different homes for some reason and I think they had been autopsied, so anyway. Then I said, "Let me see if there is anything else." And I found something else, a little star that was buried that was in honor of a veteran so I unearthed that, set it upright, and eventually put a flag in there. And then I'm looking up the hill and said, "Well, that's the burial line," and I'm looking at my notes trying to reconcile all this information. No patterns, no logic, and it finally hit me. That beginning marker that I started with, and as I started going through my paperwork I realized that I had found Grandmother's unmarked grave. So I got pictures of that, and I thought, "Man." It, I was quite excited about it and even though the actual marker never surfaced, I had heard stories about that. Those who were buried and were indigent, if the marker fell on the grave or washed away, no one really cared about maintaining that sort of thing, but anyway. I knew I had her this time. And so the groundskeeper who had been through this marathon exercise with me the previous year, I said, "OK well, look, let's rest, let's place the headstone on this spot right here; this is her." Now here's the, here's the real Twilight Zone theme song, you know, miraculous ... that tree that I told you about that I just kind of laid my hand on? Well, there was a thin branch from that tree, that tree was right there on the edge of the cemetery, OK, overlooking Potter's Field. There's a thin branch that spanned a distance of about ten, twelve, fifteen feet. OK, and I was standing up on the hill as the caretaker is beginning to lay this, this headstone about so big and every time he stood up, he would stand up and this branch basically would hit him in the head. So he reaches up, he reached up to break it and I said, "No, no. Don't break it!" I said, "You see where that branch, that limb is pointing to?" So he looked at me, he looked at the branch, and he said, "You're right." Now, I think you know, that in American Indian culture and other indigenous culture there are certain things that you kind of, which has no known, no definite, seems like there's no logic. It's not scientific, but it's spiritual. I thought, "Wow, this is ..." and not only that, when I took a picture of what was happening, there was a beam, there was a circle of sunlight, and I've got the picture to prove it, all right? But there was a circle of sunlight that came down through the canopy that was basically almost a



perfect circle, right over Grandmother Hattie's burial spot. Yeah, I kid you not. And so, friend of mine that had, this lady who had befriended me that worked with Maslin Public Library, I mean she was an angel, she was a godsend. Anyway, I asked her, "Could you please get a preacher, a pastor, we're going to bless this spot." And by that time I think I had found a cousin who remembered seeing my Grandmother Hattie when she hitchhiked from Youngstown, Ohio, to visit her sister in Bloomington, Indiana. Or was it Illinois? Indiana or Illinois? Bloomington. Anyway, yeah. Before she hitchhiked with her three kids, after her husband died, to New York because she knew that she was going to die. And after she got them to some ... this is during the Depression, now, all right? After she got to some institute of relative safety, well, within, I think four to six weeks she had died and ended up buried in Maslin, Ohio. Well, I kind of lost my train of thought there. Anyway, found her, oh, yeah, I had this, I asked this lady if she could get a preacher and by that time I had found this cousin who was in her 80s at the time who remembered seeing Grandmother visit when she was a little girl, you know, her mother's household before she hitchhiked northward. And we had a little prayer service by telephone over Grandmother's grave. So that was kind of my introduction, we always say that the ancestors will tap somebody on the shoulder and say, "Hey, you. You get out there and make sure we're not long gone and forgotten." And that's the kind of journey that this has been for me. So, yeah, it's a very spiritual issue, spiritual adventure. So that was sort of like Finders 101. Found her, she got, my grandmother got her headstone, and then, uh, you know, so, part of what brought me here is, was in Mom's memory to see how best I could put the family tree together. Now out of nearly that fifteen thousand-mile drive. I found cousins all over the place. I mean, they're just amazing and I could tell you for hours the uncanny events that popped up, just when you're about to close things up. And I'd give myself about three days per location and mind you, I didn't know what I was doing. But I have some pretty good organization management and research skillsets. I mean, I think those were innate, innately born gifts and talents. Always on time and to pay attention to detail, even to the annoyance of Mom and Pop and everyone else in the family. "You pain in the neck!" You know, of course, they would use other vernacular terms to describe me, yeah. (Laughs) But there's a reason, you know, and everyone has their talents and gifts, this apparently I guess was mine. When I got back here to, after this marathon drive, got back here I figured, "Let me try to find those who were immediately connected to family." If I could find them and then get all the major travel out of the way first, this way then I could focus on those connections here because it's more static and stable environment. Through that marathon drive, came across cousins who just happened to have had pictures. Came across a cousin who presented me with what I like to refer to as the "squiggly-wiggly list." The squiggly-wiggly list is three sheets of paper that had information on the family. Now my great-grandfather Rev. Fred W. Watkins and his wife, Sophia Napier Watkins, had at least thirteen kids. Actually eighteen, but five, no one knows anything about. So of those thirteen, Aunt Ella Victoria Watkins, who married a Thomas in Bloomington, one of those elders who didn't talk. Well, I guess when she decided she wanted to, you better be ready and you better write as quickly as you can, because when she decided to stop, that was it. And so, yeah, the squiggly-wiggly list is those

three pieces of paper where stars and, you know, and squares and lines from this part of the page up to somewhere else, and what I learned from that, that just about everything Aunt Ella, that was conveyed by her and whoever jotted it down, just about every piece of information on there is right on target. Only very little that I had to tweak and the thing is you have to think, well, what was the state of mind and health at the time she decided to talk? It could very well be that she may have also been the victim of “children should be seen and not heard” and just be amazed the she captured as much, that she heard as much as she did. So there could have been gaps in her understanding of who was connected to whom, but at least there was a roadmap. Had it not been for that squiggly-wiggly paper, my journey of 14,496 miles would have ended after the fifth mile. OK, so, as you know, I think, I assume that genealogy is part of the history research, because they’re all, they’re both, they’re all interconnected.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh, yes.

**Tom McKnight:** Archaeology, anthropology, forensics, pathology, genealogy, and history: weave them together, you’ve got, that’s story right there. That is the story. You get it, snapshot, here is that person. So what I found basically is that by putting this all together and making the concerted effort to transmute a negative situation into something positive I am so much more richer for the pain. I am so much more richer for the experience and the positive things that have emerged from it. So now, while I’m out there, somewhere out there, it wasn’t actually the badlands of New Mexico, but out there in the boonies when I learned from this cousin Nida who was, whose mother was one of the thirteen children of Great-Grandmother and Great-Granddad, that my great-grandmother Sophie Napier Watkins was a cook at Ivy Green when Helen Keller was a child. Yes, I kid you not. And so, excitedly, I called my uncle back in New York. “Uncle, guess what? Did you know Great-Grandmother was a cook at Ivy Green?” Said, “Yeah, I knew.”

**Kayla Scott:** Why didn’t you tell me? (Laughs)

**Tom McKnight:** Yeah! (Laughs) I said, “Well, how come nobody told me?” He says, “Because nobody asked.” I says, “OK.” (Laughs) And so, here’s the thing. Here’s the thing when it comes to these oral histories. For a lot of different reasons, if you don’t dig for them, you know, most cases you won’t get them. And even here, you know, when I was on the research team that recruited Dr. Barske. We had initially had some thirty candidates and we whittled it down to twenty and then ten down to the last three or four and I’ve always shared with each one of them, said, you know, if you look at any of the county heritage books, with one exception, you would never think that anyone else was here. If there is any mention of them, it’s in the context of Uncle Remus. The exception is the Colbert County Heritage book. Why? Because Rev. Otis Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church, Colonel Arthur Graves, OK, Mr. Huston Cobb and a few others made sure that our history got into the book! Number one. Number two, having been all over the world, you know, again, having been blessed to have gone, been allowed to go beyond borders, physical as well as my own and to try to discover things, people are tired of being studied, surveyed. Data being collected without any social or economic return on the investment,

you know, or no returns at all. OK, so, there's a lot of African-American gold here that contributes to the great cultural quilt. That's why I sent you that document about 360-degree peripheral vision, trying to obtain it. Because, well, for one thing, I think that as we get to a point, if the grandmothers and granddads and mothers and dads can realize that it's going to be some of their children and grandchildren, great-grandchildren that are going to benefit from some of these opportunities as curators and you know, archives managers, administrators, etc., then there's going to be more of willingness to tell the story. And so I think that this is something, I'm very, very thankful to the Department of History and Political Science, which all got started with Dr. Chris Maynard and Dr. Jeffrey Bibbee and other members of faculty that got behind this whole project that's made a concerted effort to bridge some of the "gieses" and "isms" gaps. And this is why education, exposure, and experience are so critically important along with the other parts of the equation. E to the third power equals B plus O plus U question mark exclamation point plus R question mark exclamation point and hopefully points of understanding will lead to reconciliation. And it isn't until you actually get people together and get them to start talking that you realize that your differences are not as great as the baggage that you've been carrying. Having come to Alabama ... that was quite an adjustment for me. Because, basically you're hearing things from a remote perspective, OK? But, and not only as just acceptance. My acceptance and integration has been, initially was a challenge. I mean, hey, you're born and raised in New York, man. You're a Yankee. A black Yankee. So come down here, you know, and folks look at you with a cocked eye and say, "Well, who is this person?" I mean, you're coming down here and telling them who they're related to and they're living right around the corner from each other and don't know B from Bull's Foot, you know, that they are related. So over time when they realized here's how we're cousins and go into the genealogy ... and many don't know how to do this thing. You know, "Gee, this is amazing. How do you do this thing?" Anyway, so that was part of the mission, maybe part of the purpose, so therefore you've got to validate yourself, your existence, earn trust, and I must say that within the few years that I've been here I've made presentations, talked to folks and shared my story and it's resulted in a nice little community "thang" where people, Tennessee Valley Historical Society ... well, I must say when I first came down here and started getting on board taking up memberships in the Historical Society and the Colbert County Historical Landmarks and other organizations down here the practice and the concept of diversity was a bizarre concept. I said, "Well, hold on a second." And I guess it's that Indian "thang," whereby we're pulling from something deep within, it's very spiritual, for me it is. The great wheel -- white, black, red, and yellow has been a model focus here -- subject matter whereby most people feel in the community, actually feel excluded. "Well that's not for us, that's for somebody else." But now when you open the door of inclusion, I said "Well, every ninety days there should be a presentation by those who are part of the community you know, tell their story as if they were here because they were!" So, yeah, look at the contributions of the Navaho code talkers. Had it not been for them, the Japanese couldn't, didn't have a clue. You know, what is this gibberish? These guys calling in coordinates and ordinance. There would not have been an Iwo Jima to plant the colors. Those are the stories that

you don't hear. Had it not been for the Tuskegee Airmen who escorted those bombers – B-17s and B-25s you know, into enemy territory, the world could have been a completely different place. So not a bad outcome for an experiment. Because there's a history behind that, a story behind that, as you probably well know. And of course our Japanese, our Asian-American military contributors. The 442nd, as I mentioned in that piece. It's all part of the threads that make up the fabric. What I think we've been able to accomplish by way of the great circle was only basically 270 degrees of the 360 degrees. Yeah, we have presentations on European American stuff, African-American stuff, American Indian stuff ... but what about our Asian brothers' contributions? Heck of a lot more than ironing shirts. OK. Heck of a lot more. And this is the sort of thing, this is the sort of thing that we have to recognize. I mean, I think one of the greatest reconcilers of the examples of the baggage that we tend to carry is you go in the military – man, you got guys, people coming from all walks of life -- white, black, red, and yellow, rich, poor, in-between, I mean. But as far as the drill instructor is concerned, once you get into basic training, you're all equally worthless. (Laughs)

**Kayla Scott:** (Laughs)

**Tom McKnight:** They will beat you down to build you up. And so there's no time for a whole lot of that baggage. It's not until you get into those conflict situations, I think the real shocker is that when you get onto the firing range and you're firing down range at targets you realize there might be a time when you see someone on the other side keep firing down their range, which is you. OK. And the thing is, is that when you're out there in those situations, you're all equally scared, you all equally cry, you all equally hurt, you all equally bleed the same red. And so, one is forced by education, exposure, experience into a situation where you say, "What's it all about, Alfie? Is this simply a game that we play?" One of the other experiences here in northwest Alabama once I got settled in: The Doublehead Resort was an African-American cemetery over there that had been there since the 1830s, owned by Thomas Jefferson Foster, who had significant land holdings down here. And so the cemetery's been there, and when the, when a certain wealthy family in Tuscumbia sold to another family it was on the condition that the graves, the cemetery be relocated because they wanted to clear that land in order to build townhouses and water sports facilities and blah, blah, blah. OK. So as it turned out, initially had thought there were eighty graves in the cemetery, but when they did the ground penetrating radar, found out there were 227 graves.

**Kayla Scott:** Ohhhh!

**Tom McKnight:** Yeah, and only seven headstones.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh, my!

**Tom McKnight:** So a big cold case mystery. Who were the 220 unknowns? Now of the seven headstones and here's where you get that Twilight Zone theme song coming in (hums tune) right? Of those seven headstones, there were two headstones representing the Mosaic Templers

of America, in the MTA. Now as it turned out, my great-grandmother, Sophia Napier Watkins, whose headstone is over in Oakwood Cemetery in Tuscumbia because there's also Oakwood over in Sheffield, was a member of that organization. Nobody -- white historians, black historians -- no one knew anything about the organization and that's a danger. Because you know, it just goes to prove that it only takes two generations before you relegate yourself to extinction. When the knowledge of the institution and the knowledge of the people is not passed on, it is gone. And once it's gone, it's gone. Again, the importance of this oral history program, which I'm so glad that the department and Dr. Barske embraced, because it actually became the showcase. When Dr. Barske came on board initially I said, "When are you going to launch the oral history program?" "Well, next year." I said, "Next year is too late. Because we're going to lose a lot of elders between now and then. And once it's gone, it's over. It's gone." So she launched it right away and, hey, it's been rockin' and rollin' ever since. Anyway, going back to that Mosaic Templars of America organization. By grace and mercy I was able, you know, to actually find out the history about the organization, pull together some documents, and start spreading the word through the various presentations, PowerPoint, about who it was. This was an African-American fraternal organization formed by a couple of slaves who because African-Americans couldn't gain the access to the services that they required. They said, "Hey, we're going to do our own thing," and they did. So conceived somewhere about the 1870s and 1880s actually, you know, by 1895 you had twenty-six chapters, six states, including the Caribbean as external countries. And so one of Alabama's first grandmasters was Mr. L. L. Powell, whose headstone is over in Oakwood Cemetery, no, sorry, take that back, sorry, no, whose ... let me back up a little bit. Who lived in Sheffield at some time, but of course with the loss of the 1890 census you kind of lose that track and say, "Hey, where did he go?" Well, we know he was here because one of the documents, I forget if it was the city directory that said he was here, but then he just disappeared. However, on Great-Grandmother Sophia Napier Watkins' headstone, in Tuscumbia, it has her name, and then there's some symbolism on there that has meaning, and then it has Celeste Mullins Chamber, 888 Tuscumbia, Alabama. I said, "OK, who was Celeste Mullins?" And I researched and I said, "Well, this is kind of an exotic name so it shouldn't be too difficult to track." Man, I don't know how long it took me, but I finally zeroed in on her and as it turns out ... theme song, here it comes. Twilight Zone stuff. As it turns out, Celeste, her maiden name was Harris because her mother was Creedy Harris. There was a Tom Napier who was a brother to Grandmother Sophia Napier Watkins who was living in the household as a teacher at the time, who was a teacher at the time and education and the Napiers are all tied in. And so I said, "OK." Well, when she came of age, then they got married. Now, Tom Napier died sometime between 1890 and 1900, so again -- the loss of the 1890 census, you lose two generations with the loss of the 1890 census -- that she remarried Grant Mullins. So this is Celeste Mullins, so Celeste Mullins Chamber. She ended up having her own chamber, all right? But initially she was a member of the L. L. Powell Chamber. Alabama's first grand master who lived and resided in Sheffield. Now a few months ago, I actually found the burial spot of L. L. Powell down in Montgomery, Alabama. So that presentation is on "The Hunt for Grand

Master Powell.” Looking for his picture now. I’ve got a picture of his wife and his stepchildren. OK. So we’re closing in, yeah. This is the ancestor saying, “Hey, make sure we’re not long gone and forgotten.” So the Doublehead Resort recovery exercise was, I guess, Finders 201 versus the 101 that got me started in Maslin, Ohio. So that’s the way, it’s been that way ever since. Now, so, you know, joining these various societies opened my eyes, gave me the opportunity to provide some inputs. Change does not come very easily for a whole lot of different reasons. But over time, stay positive, true to the cause, and things, positive things happen. Now as it turns out, going back to that squiggly-wiggly paper, there’s a reference to a J.C. Napier, treasury employee, and name on some money or something, and just fragmentary, fragmented, you know, annotations. Didn’t have a clue who J. C. Napier was. And one day somebody called me up, had read something in a book and said, “Hey, is James Carolyn Napier yours?” And I said, “Well, I don’t know.” So went to the Internet and all of a sudden this big splash, this explosion of stuff. Turns out that Great-Grandmother Hattie Missouri Watkins -- her brother was James Carolyn Napier. Got his law degree out of Howard University in 1872, set up his law practice in Nashville, Tennessee, was a civil rights activist and education, a politician, helped to set up, establish the first African-American bank still in existence today in Nashville. It was called the One Cent bank at the time. Now I think they call it Citizens Savings and Loan -- not the same one we have here in Alabama. Then, further research, he became the registrar of the United States Treasury during the William Howard Taft administration. And so, his signature is on all the currency that was printed in 1911 and 1913.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh, my goodness! Wow.

**Tom McKnight:** Yeah, and not only that, his great-nephew Lt. Carol Napier Langston became, was a Tuskegee Airman. Went down on the mission in 1944 and 1945. I suspect that his remains have never been repatriated from the, from where he was found with bullet holes. And I suspect he’s still over there at one of the towns in Italy and part of, by His grace and mercy if I get the resources is to see if I can find him and bring him back home so he can join the rest of the Napier family in Greenwood ... I think there’s Greenwood Cemetery up in Nashville. So you see how it all kind of comes together? It’s just been one amazing discovery, one after another. So when you have that type of knowledge, you learn that, you learn that you’re somebody. Because I remember even in school, I was born and raised in New York, the teacher would say, “All right, class. We’re going to study a little bit about Africa, turn to page blah, blah, blah.” Turn to that page and what do you see? You see a couple of natives with spears and bones in their noses standing on either side of a big pot or something and everyone turns around and looks at you, makes this connection. So history, or his story -- h-i-s t-o-r-y -- doesn’t necessarily convey, really, the richness of our joint contributions to the great wheel and that also comprises the great cultural and heritage quilt that makes up not only northwest Alabama, but the world. And so it’s the country. So, that’s part of what brought me here to Alabama and I don’t think that the world is, I don’t think the Lord is done with me yet, but there’s other things to do. One important thing that needs to be done is to ensure that Great-Grandmother Sophia Napier Watkins existence is

venerated, because there is no mention of her in any of the literature, any of the plays, in any of the movies, OK? And they mention Viny Murphy. Viny Murphy and Grandmother worked together. Viny Murphy was a nursemaid to Helen Keller's siblings Phillips Brooks, and Mildred Keller. She's recognized, this is good. And at some point and time she may have been the cook, because there was a time when Great-Grandmother actually left here with Great-Granddad because their son, Rev. Fred Watkins III, Uncle Fred had moved to Louisiana. And Great-Granddad was tough. He was tough man. Nobody messed with him. He didn't play. Be a Baptist preacher, but if he had cause, he would shoot you in a heartbeat. Yeah, one of those guys. Fire and brimstone. But then, you, with history you've got to think of the context, you know, what drove people to become who they were. And so if you think back, where you know, that may have come from, it's coming from Great-Great Granddad the Cherokee. Not at all a happy camper because his way of life had been disrupted. Folks are pickin' folks up, puttin' 'em on trains, puttin' 'em on boats, shipping them out west in environments that they can't possibly survive in. And you had to stand your ground, OK? Just had to. There was an article in the Moulton Advertiser, early 1900s, now this would have been regarding Great-Granddad Rev. Fred -- second generation Rev. Fred. Said, "Brother Watkins preached a sermon in Russellville that stirred up the community from center to circumference. A committee approached him and asked him to leave. He left on the next train." I think he had a pretty good idea who that committee was that told him, "Y'all get on out of here, all right?" OK. That's Great Granddad. But here's the thing. I learned so much from this genealogy and history and this research exercise in that I'm convinced and I guess this all kinda goes back to some scriptural tether, you know, because everything is like a mirror image of everything else "on earth as it is in heaven." Well, yeah. Kind of makes sense. If you have physical genes, is it possible that you've also got spiritual gene? Now science will never, you know, say "Oh yeah." Everything has to be defined and validated. Yes, this exists by science because ... yeah, but hey, you have only been on this planet x million or hundreds of thousands of years, but you are not the creator! Even with this as I see it, this 360-degree peripheral-vision concept quest. The closest that anyone is going to get is 359 degrees of the great circle because at 360 is His domain. Yeah? So, yeah, as I see it, and then you start seeing generational, this correspondence from one generation to the other. A spirituality that is kind of passed down to one generation to another. How come so many of these members of the family tree, how come their unit of service was the pulpit? Now, that's not my calling, at least I don't think so. But my unit of service was, you know, going beyond the borders and making sure that some child who hadn't seen food or needed to be immunized or that the, the, the possibility of that person, being a part of the possibility of that person being able to witness another sunrise, sunset. That was, that was, I guess that was, that was my unit of service. So ...

**Kayla Scott:** That's one of the questions that I had for you is that I was wanting to ask you about your United Nations missions.

**Tom McKnight:** And so that's kind of a ministry as well, OK. So as I see it, well, there are so many correspondences. Look at life. I've learned I guess through the growth process and taking

on these various challenges that, and you know you can choose to remain, say, “Well, I’m afraid to go outside the door because ...” Yeah, but you’ll never know unless you try! Explore the forest, man. Don’t just stop there, don’t just stop there at the entrance, because when you get in there, oh, man, this is so great. And there’s nothing more liberating than to surrender yourself to acknowledge that, hey, I got issues, I need to be doing better than this. Going back to this, if I might digress, going back to the Doublehead Resort cemetery. Another freeze-frame moment. Being the so-called expert now on the Mosaic Templers of America, I was the only one that knew anything about that organization and then there was the two amongst the other five, I kind of got hired. That was the first time, first time I had got involved in the archaeology work. Man, I tell you, my body paid for it, too. You’re down there on haunches using a trowel taking off just grains of earth. And my very first grave, and in those days they did bury you six feet under, not like today -- four feet. It was six feet under. It took me three solid weeks to get down to recovery level. And anything that’s out there ... OK, in accordance with the history and archaeological protocol you film, snapshot everything, document everything, and anything that’s recovered stays together and whatever is recovered, whether it’s full skeletons, partial skeletons, or nothing more than maybe just the tip of a piece of safety pin whereby an infant has passed away and that’s all that was left or a button of his gown, you catalogue that, you put it in you know some kind of a Tupperware, plastic box and it gets reinterred at the, at the, somewhere else. Well, I got down to recovery level. I looked down there and said, “Where is this person?” I mean, I, yeah, I mean the only thing that was left of that individual was the stain. You could see a stain, you could see the outline of where the head was, the outline of a couple of eye orbits, a couple of teeth, OK, but it was all stain, so when those pastors issued statements of committal, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, that is exactly the way it works! On this side, we see that individual in life, they pass, we have this snapshot of what they look like at rest and that’s the last we see is when they’re lowered into the ground. But there is a process, a thing that says back to earth. You came, that’s the way you go. So I thought to myself, and this is deep, I thought that what we were engaged in was a ... was a violation of a sacred resting place. In the name of someone’s name of progress. But it was better that the institute that I was working with at least did the recovery and treated those ancestors with respect. Otherwise they could have been plowed over altogether and all of their existence and knowledge of their existence would have been lost. And so I’m thinking, “I wonder what kind of an individual this person was? Pain in the neck, nice guy, or nice lady or whatever.” And again, going back to, going back to the root cause issues, because in my UN work I wore a number of different hats and we’ll talk about that, but I was either a project officer or whatever, you’re always kind of looking for “root cause” and try to find the thing that will remedy, the solution to the problem that will have a multiplier healing and functional impact instead of this Band-Aid approach and just say, well, “OK, well, you’ve got a busted artery here, but we’re just going to put a Band-Aid on that.” No, you’ve got to go to root cause! If I were a surgeon, and I wanted to be a doctor when I was a kid. I guess that wasn’t in the cards either. And I’d say, “Well, hey, go in there and you know, find what the problem is, well, while I’m in there and I see something else, well, hey, I’m going to fix that, too.” OK, so



you fix it. Provide added value. You fix it and then say, “OK, go forth, young man, young woman, and do whatever.” Anyway, I tried to think of root cause. What? And then I thought, “I wonder what this person was like in their life. Pain that they put folks through.” And then it occurred to me. The root cause problem is between the ears. The baggage that we carry for seventy-five, eighty, a hundred, however long we are allowed to be on this earth ... I mean, when it’s over, it is over. So what’s the point? What’s that baggage we’re carrying? And again, this is kind of what ended up inspiring me to write that piece, which again was one of those snap, one person just happened to be here at the right time, invited me to participate in the fundraising event over at the St. John’s Episcopal Church in Tusculumbia and read poems with some other folks. And there was something I sent in the email thanking him and he said, “Would you be able, would you be willing to expand on that? No more than 1,500 words?” Hadn’t thought about it, but said, “Yeah, OK.” So, couple days, typing along, and then voila. A few revisions, finally I said, “Whoa, this is from the heart.” Verbally, it articulated something that was within in the first place, but I had never, it was a time, at that time to articulate it in such a way that it would have crossed generational and basically diverse and widespread impact. I thought, “Wow, thank you Father, for the divine inspiration.” So, that was a revelation for me. “What’s it all about, Alfie? Is it simply a game that we play?” And what can one do to make the world a better place? You wanted to know, so that’s part of what has brought me here and I’m still growing. I must say that when you’re finally recognized by people in the community, the diversity of their recognition is a nice acknowledgement that you must be doing something. I mean, I, we had our last meeting a couple of weeks ago on Sunday and I thanked, I received, well, actually I received an award last year from the NAACP thanking me for my work cause I’m also on the board of the Martin Luther King scholarship committee. I’m a member of the American Legion Post 31 color guard. We do military funerals as a community service for families whose veterans have fallen and so we give them proper honor. Love doing that. Great band of brothers. And of course Colbert County’s Historical Landmark program chair presently, Tennessee Valley Historical Society chair and other things that I’m involved with. It’s to be recognized by your own and also be recognized by other members of the community. I mean, no one would have ever thought, I would never have thought that I would receive a certificate of award from the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. Yeah, got a certificate from them and then got notified a couple of weeks ago that there’s a medal and a pen that goes along with it, as well. I said, “Well, thank you.” So this is good stuff. Now, one of the, one of the members of, one of the people who came at the last, to the last quarterly meeting, said “I didn’t realize,” it was a black guy, said, “I didn’t realize you were doing all of this in the community.” And I said, “Well, I didn’t either.”

**Kayla Scott:** (Laughs)

**Tom McKnight:** No, I really didn’t. It doesn’t look like, it’s not a big thing. It’s not about ego, it’s not about, it’s just basically following what the Lord has put before you. Now, as I look at life, OK, of nearly almost seventy years on the planet, on this journey. What I’ve learned is that because of those mirror-image issues, OK, “on earth as it is in Heaven” everyday it just begins to

make more sense to me as I see so many correspondences of that “on earth as it is in Heaven.” So when you think about our institutions, our hierarchies, and the systems that we devise as our, you know, yeah, we’re the greatest things on the planet. Well, you’re not the only folks in the universe, either. Because there’s something I think a heck of a lot more intelligent out there than what’s here. What we experience is a microcosmic model example of a macrocosmic principle. So all of our little conventional things, institutions, and hierarchies you know, well, there’s a mentoring process, a teaching process, there’s a time and a place for all things under the sun, you know, where you say “OK, are you ready for this?” So, therefore, as you, based on the knowledge at the time that it is thought that you can handle it, you can move at your own pace and accelerate and if you meet the grade, you get an A. If you don’t meet the grade, don’t apply the basics, stay in the loop until such time that you get a jar on that table and you bounce into a new grove. So that’s what I see. You get people stuck in this grove physically and even spiritually. “On earth as it is in Heaven.” Yeah, microcosmic example of a macrocosmic principle. So I see those connections; that’s me. I know that this is probably one of the, I don’t know, going to be one of the weirdest interviews you’ve ever had, but it’s different. So, yeah, unit of service, all those other folks in my family tree, you know, went by way of the pulpit. My unit of service was the global community of which I am still in some way tethered. Matter of fact, as we speak I’m about to deploy for a bit on an assignment and we’ll see how things go. Hence the urgency to try to get this interview before that departure. Bitterness, pain, disappointment -- they’re all stepping stones to growth on so many different levels. Let’s talk about UN. Like I say, sometimes we get the opportunity to see the worst of the worst that people can levy on one another. You know, all of my, most of the majority of the country that I worked in have been conflict zones. Kosovo, Sudan, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique ... you just name it. You see something and say, “No, it doesn’t get any worse.” But it does. It does. How, you know, how is this possible? So the Sudan, oh, no, let me back up. First exposure to emergency operations was when I joined UNICEF and somebody thought, “Ah, you’re field material.” And I was headquarters New York and I didn’t know what field material meant. But somebody, HR officer saw something in me, you know, and nine months after I joined I was out in the, in Sudan, back in 1979, ’81, I believe and that was my first experience, my first exposure to things. A water developing project. And I thought, “OK, Lord, this is all right. This is not bad.” OK, say, “I told you. I told you. You had to give up that baseball thing. Had to break your finger, had to pull a hamstring and all this other stuff. Snapped Coach Reese out of your life. Yeah, told you.” But anyway, but there was, uh, talk about bitterness. There was an operation in southern Sudan, a cross-border operation out of Kenya into South Sudan from 1989, I think it was, yeah, 1989 the launch of Operation OLS Operation Lifeline Sudan. And because Sudan had been embroiled in a long standing civil war conflict north versus south, Arab versus Christian, uh, you know, Islam versus Christian, you know, there’s a lot of things: draught, famine, and civil conflict. So as a cross-border operation out of Kenya and then Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, ’cause Sudan is a landlocked country. The UNICEF, which I was an officer on staff at the time, was to provide relief to the victims of the conflict, but in the southern sector in rebel-controlled territory. Now,

we had a UNICEF office in Khartoum, and there focused on the victims of the conflict in government garrison towns. Of course the government of Khartoum didn't like the idea that their sovereignty had been violated. And so because now they saw those in southern sector out of Kenya cross border outside of Kenya, then you know, interfering in their internal affairs. Wore a number of hats. Set up the base camp in northern Kenya that was our point into South Sudan. And then, of course, been an operations officer so I know operations quite well and I was also a projects officer. At this time I had an opportunity to become the project officer for the immunization program: EPI -- Expanded Program of Immunization. Basically because of the children, whereas in the states children have the benefit of public health interventions, whereby they can get immunized and protect them from the childhood diseases which are killers. Measles, polio, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, tuberculosis ... you know, well, an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure and it's low cost. So, therefore, I became the EPI project officer because the demand was so great, so that was another hat that I had an opportunity to wear and grow into. Liaised with a lot of the rebel commanders. At that time John Gerang was the, Col. Gerang who defected from the Khartoum military, northern military, and decided to take on the cause of fighting for the rebels because they're mostly Dinka or Africa you know, African folks, they're all Africans but there's that "ias" and "ism" thing again going on. Liaised with a number of the commanders out there to get some of these programs off the ground. We had managed to raise immunization coverage for measles from anywhere from zero to 75 percent or zero to 90 percent in Sudan People Liberation Army or SPLA-controlled areas, which was phenomenal because while Khartoum government had reported, "Oh, yeah, we're meeting the mid-decade goals, oh yeah, our coverage ..." it wasn't true. These kids weren't being immunized and there were a whole lot of other things going on there. Well, some friends of mine got killed in what was considered a crossfire between rival factions. I wasn't in Sudan at the time, I was on home leave, but by the time I got back, you know, these were friends of mine. I knew three of the four, and they ... there was no reason for it.

**Kayla Scott:** Right.

**Tom McKnight:** And so, and when they recovered their remains, they had gunshots to the back of the head. That's not a crossfire, that's an execution. Well, I basically had gotten quite dissatisfied with Sudan and it wasn't long I think, at some point after that I transferred to another operation in Somalia and that was another zoo. But anyway, we had gotten to the point of coverage. Now we weren't successful with the triple-dose vaccines like DPT -- diphtheria pertussis, tetanus, and polio -- because you don't have access. You have to go back four rounds, three rounds and you're not going to find that same population in that area because they are worried about being attacked and getting bombed. But measles, because measles and malnutrition is an instant killer, measles we were more successful with and that was really the focus. They said, "Tom, just focus on measles and I said, "No, let's not miss an opportunity to get the triple doses while we're out here. At least somebody might be able to live a little bit longer than statistically they would have." Anyway, it got to the point where I said, "OK," I said,

I told these guys “go out to the various locations, how’s EPI?” “Oh, ICRC’s doing it, some other organization’s doing it.” And I said, “Well, what are you guys doing?” Uh, assuming that you immunize 100 percent of a child population, what are you going to do about the newborns? Where’s the sustainability? You ought to be writing your own proposals and getting your own donors, funding from the donors.

**Kayla Scott:** Right.

**Tom McKnight:** Because Mr. Tom is not going to be here forever. Mr. Tom doesn’t want to be here forever. This here you can have. Because when I get done here, I want to take off on a big plane, banks off to left to right, and know those guys can take it to a higher level because I trained them. OK? So it’s not all about, you know, empire building and protection. Hey, take it. It’s less for me to have to ... I don’t like to micromanage, can if I have to, but the biggest joy is seeing people who are empowered to do for themselves because it’s got to be sustainable. Well, we had gone, gotten to the point I said, “Tell you what. You, we’re going to do something that’s never been done before. We’ll train some mid-level managers, EPI mid-level managers. You identify your candidates and I’ll get them trained.” Now, when they identified candidates, talking about southern Sudan, OK, no communication, no railroads, no train, nothing. No flights except maybe UN flights from time to time. Basically, when they calculated where a candidate from behind the Gazelle province in Akon, it takes ninety days to walk from there to eastern Equatorial to attend this training session in Lokichoggio. This is the base camp set up or in Kapoeta. Ninety days! Everything is measured in how long does it take to walk. OK. I said, so I went to the Kenyan government, negotiated with their minister of health and said, “Can you send us your best mid-level management trainers?” Because I went through that program. And they did. Got everything set up, got these guys trained in how to install solar panels to fuel the, power up the solar-powered vaccine refrigerators and solar-powered ice makers and stuff like that, and get them installed in the peripheral. And that was on the basis of these guys in government imposing a year’s flight ban where we didn’t have access to folks. So, OK, caught everybody by surprise, so all right, next rainy season, because you work in between rainy seasons and dry seasons. Offensive launch in the dry season until such point and time that the rains hit because you’re, the whole area is black cotton soil and you cannot move. You’re mired down until the sun comes out and dries everything up and everybody rocks and rolls again. Capture territory from one year to another. Anyway, we got these guys trained all ready to go and then what happens? The SPLA split into two factions. John Gerang faction, and then Commander Riek Machar, the guy who’s in the newspapers now even though South Sudan is an independent country, but these guys are doing the same thing they did back in the day. So what happens? They start attacking one another. Your precious coal chain goes up in smoke here, your four-wheel drive vehicles you need to get to one location to the other either get looted or burned to the ground. I said, “Hey, what’s the matter with you guys? How do I go back to the donors asking for startup stuff that they’ve already funded? Without a doubt, I’d be able to get all the money I need for training. This is something that hasn’t been done. You’re on the threshold, the cutting

edge of something that hasn't been done in a war zone before. How do I go back? What's the matter with you guys? Why don't you agree to put a ring of protection around the humanitarian assets? So when you're finally done with your foolishness of flinging bullets, and you really want to get serious about development, you've got something to work with. OK? Why not?" Well, got very bitter, I got very bitter. I said, "Why am I doing this?" Especially after the loss of some friends and stuff like that. "Why am I doing this? To prolong the life of a child who statistically would not have made it past a fifty-year life then to do what -- become a child soldier? Then when I'm driving through a checkpoint, have somebody blow me away with an AK-47? Why am I doing this?" I was bitter. Not a good place to be. But, you get an opportunity to reconcile and think things through and one day I remember flying in a Twin Otter, which is a bush plane, into a village and touching down on a little dirt strip somewhere and you look out and you get out and see this whole cluster of folks. Grannies and moms and dads and kids different ages. Because of the war and drought, and famine, and their own "ieses" and "isms," it's not just here, it's a global problem, wondering who you are and what kind of projects and programs are you bringing. And you look out there and you say, "OK. If by some miracle just one of these kids managed to survive this environment, managed to get an education, got to a university. What could that person's contribution be that would have geometrical proportion impact?" Come up with a cure for cancer, come up with a cure for AIDS, come up with some new equation for quantum physics, or whatever. That was the reconciling point for me. I said, "Ahh, power of one." Power of one. Again, you get an opportunity, or at least I feel that I get the opportunity to make that correlation that corresponds between some of these teachings. And I'm not talking about, it's not necessarily a religious thing, you know, that fanatical, no, it's a spiritual thing. OK. Power of one. There's a lesson here, all right. What one person can do can impact one person's life. And so that was my reconciling point. Again, transmute a negative experience of pain, hurt, loss, into something positive. Yeah. You write your proposals for this intervention. A million. A trillion. A bazillion it's going to benefit. OK, you need to do that to get the donors to get the money. But my unit of measurement is that if you manage to, OK, even if there's no more than giving that person the opportunity to see that extra day's sunrise and sunset, that's success. OK? OK, if you want to play with numbers and percentages, that's fine. But for me? Hey, you know. One. What did I do today that positively benefited this other person? OK? Now, out a bazillion and there's only one. Gee, where's the, come up with all these ratios. Listen, I don't care about that. Now, you know that what you do is going to impact more than one.

**Kayla Scott:** Right.

**Tom McKnight:** But for me, my unit of measurement of success? Hey, the fact that on this grid of life, this cosmic grid of life, there's another correspondence here that will be coming up in a second that you've had an opportunity to interact with that person, make that person a better day. That person may not have, until they met you, could have been thinking some things that would have done he or she harm. But the fact that you put a little positivity in that talk or complimented

that individual ... you don't know what the impact is. So anyway, we know we're going to impact more than one person, therefore anything more than one is gravy on potatoes. Yeah! So that's a refocusing, it's just a, yeah, I remember one time in Somalia on one of my Somalia operations, this is after a major battle between, this is in Mogadishu now, between General Aidid who controlled southern Mogadishu, and Ali Mahdi, who controlled the north. Now when that battle went down, everybody as they say it, booked. Everybody hightailed it out of there. All of the agencies, the UN agencies, NGOs, back in Nairobi until after the dust settled down. Go back in, gotta start all over from scratch. I remember ... if you've ever seen *Black Hawk Down*, then you kind of get an idea of what Mogadishu is like. I mean, just basically a war-torn, bombed-out environment. And you have a whole bunch of people sitting around in the yard, grannies with emaciated kids and they're emaciated and then you have this one child resting in this mother or grandmother's arms. And the little orange, you know, and you got this NGO who's cooking up this porridge in the bombed-out classroom, putting it in little orange cups. And the moment I saw that cup being raised to, by this granny to this child or grandchild's face, I knew. It was too late. I just see so much and say, "Oh no, it's too late, man." You could almost basically see the spirit leave this person's body. And if that granny could grab that soul and pull it back into that child's body, she, if she could, she would. But she can't. It's kind of a no-personalities, no-politics, no-time for frame of mind when I'm out there, because I'm out there for, I don't care about the stuffed shirts in these capital cities. They don't have a clue about what the field is like. I've been there! So I don't, you know, get out there, give us your presence, and you'll see that there are no provisions out there back in the day. So I tell these guys, no matter what the missions are, hey, however long we're in between these gates, these are your folks. They deserve nothing less ...

**Kayla Scott:** Than your best.

**Tom McKnight:** That's right. You make sure that they get another opportunity to see another sunrise and a few more sunsets if it's at all possible. So, yeah, the correspondences that I was talking about, cosmic correspondences. Remember as a kid in math class, you would have graph paper? You would plot x and y, the axis, and all that other stuff? Well, kinda see this great cosmic grid that extends throughout the universe and points of light, some are running parallel, some are horizontal, some are vertical. But there's points and time where those at some predetermined time where two sparks come together and that's, uh, you know, there's a purpose for that. So, yeah, we all kind of live for a purpose. So again, what brought me here? Pain. Hurt. Divine intervention. An open-door opportunity to grow. A willingness to accept growth, even if you don't even think you have the skillsets, but to embrace it. Because the only thing that you're going to get out of it is knowledge and then you can be of even greater service to somebody else. You can empathize better. Yeah? It's a 360-degree thing. Physically, let's think about this. You're driving down the road, and if you ask yourself, "What do I see?" Most times what you would define in your line of sight is linear and maybe in degrees of that much. But when you think about it when you expand your consciousness, "What do I see?" You think about it and you realize that you actually see 180 degrees physically peripheral vision. Yeah! You can pick up

stuff here and you can pick up stuff there. So it's like an exercise. So it's all of these things where you have to, really, as I see it, because this is my story, I know because I've had the, I've dared to put, to undertake what has been placed before me, and yeah, I've learned some hard lessons, but that's the best way to learn. Otherwise, you're not going to understand what, you can't understand someone unless you've walked at least a few steps in their moccasins. So you see how these things all come together from different cultures. So, yeah, divine intervention, and mission, it's a mission, and maybe even ministry. I've had preachers down here tell me, "I couldn't do what you do." And I think, "What do I do?" "Well, I can't do what you do." Some of these elders say, "Everyone's got a ministry and this one is yours." So I don't look at it that way. I just prefer to remain simple unassuming Tom McKnight and do what needs to be done and when that time comes that it's time to move on to do something else, then so be it. But, you know, whether it's in any of the missions that I've undertaken or anything that I do, change is inevitable. Seasons change. Everything changes. Now if you spend, as you get involved with something and you don't, and by the time you leave, whether it be six months, a year, or ten years, there's been no change, then you've wasted your time. You've wasted your time. And it's got to be change for the better, not just change for change's sake. If you get an opportunity, you have the responsibility to make something a little bit better and leave it better than when you found it. A whole lot of careers have been sustained because people hold back. If you know as much as I do, then you're going to get ahead. Hey, listen, hey. Take it. Basically live, I mean, basically I'll take assignments and do things that I've never done before. That's scary stuff. People say, yeah, but, when you find yourself, put yourself into a situation like that. Man, you digging deep. How can I? First of all, are you crazy? How can I make this happen? But the fact that you create that positive point of tension. You find yourself driven now to find the knowledge and find a way, and I tell you, there's a creative thing that goes in and you say, "Oh!" Bingo. Yeah, OK. Now, in that UN life, I mean, there's hardly anything that I haven't done. Uh, here, you see again, from that, (points to resume) multi-skills.

**Kayla Scott:** Yes, very much so.

**Tom McKnight:** And, not, it's not ego, but I've done what I done. But that's because you immerse yourself into something and you grow with it. Now a lot of times you'll be, there'll be a project. You've got these two worlds. You've got operations, the admin, the finances, and the logistics and, you know, and procurement and then you've got the program officers and there's these two worlds separated. Folks up in there, it's like a Frisbee in the wind and these guys say "Oh yeah, we conceptualize and you guys just ..." Hey. Times when I have to go out on these missions I've been a project officer, I've been a program officer, I've been, I know all of the operations, yeah, I know how it all works. You know, hey, cut the stuff, all right? First of all, you can't do without that, and you can't do without that, because you're all one integral part of the big machine. Now you want to play, well, watch what happens when the orders are walked through. OK? Cut this foolishness out, now here's the solution. Root cause. Bring, synthesize, bring synergies together, bring programs together, and forget the politics and the personalities.

So, yeah, that's, so, yeah, total immersion. Because here's the thing. You can be even a better servant, yeah, you've done all of this, have all of this experience. Take my notes, go into my little lab. Come out six months later, mad scientist, eureka. Here it is! It makes you, you're a better contributor the more you know. Not for the sake of your ego, but to say, "OK, yeah, I understand." Empathy and compassion comes into this. Yeah, OK, yeah. Some of our biggest problems in ... some of our biggest problems in implementing on the ground is result of attitude. I, even today, although I'm kind of somewhat out of the business, so to speak, but I'm kind of still tethered, I tell folks, I say, "Listen. When you go down into these situations, these fields, don't come walking in here with your Ph.D.s and your double masters and all this other stuff, you know, letters behind your name. OK, here's how it's done. Listen." I said, "You treat everyone, even those who have never seen the inside of a primary school, as if they're Ph.D.s." Look at you like "What do you mean?" "Because they are. Because if you had to survive the environment that they have to experience every single day, I guarantee you, I guarantee you, you will not make it through your third day."

**Kayla Scott:** Everyone has their own skillsets.

**Tom McKnight:** Yeah, they're the experts out there. And the other thing, too. Folks are deep. They're spiritually deep. I know that, I know that, uh, a lot of these guys, they know you better five minutes after they have met you, they know you better than you know yourself because they read your heart. I don't know you can call it a sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth sense – all right, and so don't go out there with a whole bunch of pretense because they'll know. And you could save yourself a whole lot of money lying up on a psychiatrist's or analyst's couch trying to figure out what's wrong with you, OK, because they'll tell you "Man, you're messed up," and they'll tell you for free. Won't even bill you. And they'd be right. Yeah, there's a spiritual thing there, OK? Goodwill, a smile, goes a long way. I was on a mission in Somalia in Hargeisa. Somalia was a place that I said I would never go back there, I've been on a number of missions there. It's like, no! I had forgotten northwest Somalia. Basically divorced themselves from their brethren in northeast and south central, and so said, oh yeah, OK. Went up there and one of the deputies of one of the UN agencies that I was on a consulting mission for had a problem with one of the guys in the ministries up in Hargeisa. Capital of northwest what they call Somaliland. Twenty-five years ago they actually got their currency, their own president, legislature; you know development focused, not like elsewhere. And had the problem, "The guy's a lunatic." Listen to the briefing that I'm in, "This guy's a lunatic." Went up there on a quick familiarization tour, a couple of days. I met that guy. By the time, by the third day I was coming out, I was leaving to get back to Nairobi, I had about nine documents that this deputy had been promised but had never got because of this. The clash. Now maybe, just maybe, there's always a perfect example of water seeking its own level, two lunatics who say, "Yeah, I recognize it. No problem, yeah, here." (Laughs) It boils down to this. Goodwill, a smile, finding a need, and filling it. OK? I'm a visual guy. I'm a map guy. Go up first thing, my methodology, metaphorically speaking, parachuting into this environment kind of where you don't have much time to find out who's



doing what where and find out, well, OK, find out what's happening here. I say, look. Let's develop, I develop my own map, have some maps developed that can serve as a multipurpose function. As a planning tool, presentation tool, monitoring evaluation tool, programming tool ... I mean, hey, listen. Have you got this? Put it on the DVD. Right away they say, "Hey." "You like this?" "Yeah." "I'll get some made for you." Get back to Nairobi, run off about three dozen of these things. Put a little note on there. Give it to the minister of Planning and Development and these UN agencies and NGOs and whatever, and I mean, within the three weeks I was up there, I was asked to actually do the keynote presentation for this interagency first time, new government, blah, blah, blah. Again, find the need and fill it and smile. Goodwill goes a long way.

**Kayla Scott:** It does.

**Tom McKnight:** Yeah, don't be passing on, "Oh, this person's a lunatic." Let me tell you -- word gets back! Everybody knows somebody. Remember I told you about my friends who were killed?

**Kayla Scott:** Right. Yes, I remember you saying that.

**Tom McKnight:** I left that operation, you know, was in Somalia, then after Somalia I was in Kenya emergency, then I get an opportunity to be a resource person in the emergency management workshop in South Sudan. I was not ... too enthusiastic about it, because I hadn't healed. I was going through a healing process and, you know, I was bitter. That was another bitter episode and I thought, "Well, if you don't seize the opportunity and expose yourself to this thing, you may never heal." I said, "OK, all right, fine." So anyway, we had this workshop at Lokichoggio, this base camp that I had formed some years ago, you know, and then we were supposed to, each group was assigned to a location. Southern Sudan ... anyway, we had to take a DC-3 out of Lokichoggio, Kenya, into Rumbek on the western part of the Nile. When I got down there, we were supposed to meet the rebel, one of the rebel representatives that did the administration, blah, blah, blah. He wasn't there, but there was somebody in that group that I thought I recognized from some previous year's movement in the bush. And so I asked him, "Do you know so-and-so?" And he said, "Yeah, oh, yeah. About twenty-five kilometers away." I said, "What about commander so-and-so and so-and-so." "Yeah, he's ... ." And everything was like that. I said, "So can you get a message to ... ?" cause these were the guys, it was a commander of commanders, Commander Daniel, who had been the commander of commanders of everything on the west bank and when I was out there he made sure that I was able to get from one sector to another.

**Kayla Scott:** Forgive me. I'm supposed to be meeting someone in just a few minutes.

**Tom McKnight:** Oh, OK. I had better wrap this thing up. Anyway, so, yeah, we've been talking for two hours. Been fun two hours. Anyway, the guy, anyway, sent a message, "Can you get a message to this guy?" And as we're leaving, the DC-3 is coming back in now, to pick us up, take

us out of there back into Kenya. Well, who drives up in this Land Rover as we're walking up to the strip? And I recognize the guy from our adventures, I guess out in the field some years before. And the guy says, "Hey, where you going?" I said, "Hey, how you doing?" Everybody's slapping backs and whatever. I said, "Well, I'm going back to Lokichoggio." He said, "Yeah, but, Commander Daniel sent us to get you, thought that you would spend a few days with us. He's going to slaughter a bull for you." Now that's an honor. Slaughter a bull for a foreigner? That was the kind of a relationship that had developed. Finding a need and filling it. Now some of these guys, commanders who had no access to nothing, drought, famine ... whenever I was out there, I would bring sugar, tea, and biscuits. Small stuff, but, hey, so anyway, so I gotta go and everything. Long story short, I asked him how some of the new officers in UNICEF were faring out there. I said, "Make sure you take care of them as well as you did me." The guy looked at me. And we were talking about someone, here's the point about everybody knows somebody? I never really found out what happened to these four people, who gave the order for their execution. Anyway, I said, "Well, how's so-and-so-and-so? And so-and-so?" "Well, he's a commander on the front line." I said, "Oh, really?" This guy was previously secretary general. I thought, "That's a demotion. Why?" I put two and two together -- because he gave the order and got these guys killed. Then he said, "Oh, he's my cousin, you know." I said, "Oh, yeah? Oh, OK, give him my best regards." Yeah, uh huh. Everybody knows somebody so you gotta be careful. Don't be out there in the field talking about ... it gets back. Anyway, treat these folks with respect. Did I ramble?

**Kayla Scott:** Sounded fine to me.

**Tom McKnight:** Did I even remotely cover what you may have had in mind?

**Kayla Scott:** You certainly did. You talked about your UNA, I mean, your UN work, and I definitely wanted the story of how you came to Alabama and you covered that very well.

**Tom McKnight:** Did I?

**Kayla Scott:** Very interesting story.

**Tom McKnight:** OK, well. Divine intervention. Let go and let God, and he will direct your path. Yeah, so it happens to be a spiritual thing, and it continues. There's still more work to be done here. Been blessed to have met a number of elders and folks who embraced me and felt that I was OK. That's the other thing with elders. They may not say much, but they're wise. I was in Somalia, I was standing outside waiting for my driver to come to pick me up. This Somali guy looks at me, right away they can figure you out and they know who you are. Says, "Hey, you're an elder." Kind of smiled. Maybe I am. But they, that's that sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth sense. They just know who you are. Forget the pretense. Just give them your best. You know, "Why don't you spend x number of days with us and we'll slaughter a bull for you." I told him, "Tell Commander Daniel that's quite an honor. Maybe some other time our paths will cross at some other point and time, but I've got to get on back." OK, well, any questions?

**Kayla Scott:** I think you covered everything really well. I appreciate you meeting with me.

**Tom McKnight:** Well, likewise. I mean, I'm so happy and proud that this oral history program is moving forward and that Dr. Barske and the rest of them ... I always tell Dr. Barske, I say, "You know, you're a blessing to northwest Alabama." And I know she gets a little bit embarrassed. But that's OK, because it's the truth. She has done much in a very, very short time. And so it's really wonderful to be a member of this partnership. OK, well, thank you for *your* time and for arranging your schedule to accommodate me.

**Kayla Scott:** Oh, you're welcome! Thanks!