

Paul Ortiz: Okay.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: We had the world's best. I grew up in that type of environment.

Paul Ortiz: Did Paul Robeson come here?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Paul Robeson came, yes. I heard Marian Anderson. I heard Leontyne Price before she was famous. And so many. I should imagine and I realize that I have named only African Americans, but the menu was just diversified in terms of the Russian singers and dancers as well as the French and the Italian and so forth.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Tuskegee's Entertainment Course, as it was called during that time, was superior. It gave you that kind of opportunity. I was in Washington on one occasion at Smithsonian when they were just so elated over the arrival of a gazebo.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I looked at it and it was small in comparison to one that we had that was permanently built on our campus, on the lawn. It's that open architecture with just the roof and the band and the orchestra place. Well, I want you to know that when I was growing up, every Sunday at four o'clock, the band, the Tuskegee Band gave concert on the lawn of White Hall. All classical music.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: You begin to appreciate this at an early age, wherein in the city, you have the same opportunity but your parents have to pay, I guess, quite a bit. Some of the people I've heard speak in New York, probably the dinner ticket or whatever the entrance might have been, \$50 or \$60. But here at Tuskegee, those same person spoke in chapel to the community without any expense.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: We had a grand opportunity. I want you to know that not only Black people, but White people in this town and community attended. This very house that I live in was built by a White couple and they had a small family, three boys I think. And she was telling me that she wanted—

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, they retired and moved to Florida and she said she heard me speak in chapel. Now, that told me something you don't know who's sitting out there listening to you and you don't know what their plans are. When she wanted me to buy this house, I already have a house. When my husband died 25 years ago, we lived in the campus community.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: We built a house there. I told this family this and she said, "Finally!" They gave many reasons why they wanted me to live here. My son was in high school, the two of us. My daughter was married, and she said that her mother was an artist. When I visited, I saw all of the portraits throughout the house and her husband's father was an architect and he built the house.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: She said they wanted art to live on in the house. I hadn't thought about that. I really hadn't thought about that. She was back last two weeks ago for a visit. She comes back occasionally. This was a neighborhood where—Well, this was a neighborhood that I had never even—I didn't even know was here because you drive down South Main and go to North. If you don't know anybody, when—I hadn't even looked at the street sign because I didn't know anybody who lived in this section. But years ago, I'm sure when I was growing up, I didn't know anyone who lived in this section of town.

Paul Ortiz: This used to be predominantly a White section of town?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes, it was all very much so.

Paul Ortiz: I imagine that there was some kind of spatial segregation in Tuskegee.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: You mean as far as residence?

Paul Ortiz: Residents, yeah.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yeah. I'm sure. I'm very sure. In this section of town definitely was.

Paul Ortiz: Now it seems quite reasonable to assume that you perhaps inherited some of your artistic talent from your parents, from your father, as a professor of art and architecture. Could you tell me a little bit about your mother and father?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Oh yes. My mother was a very, very friendly person and very supportive. She wanted me so much to continue my music lessons. I started at six years old, but so interesting in life, my father had the philosophy that he wanted to take care of his wife and daughter and that she did not have to work.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: But life just didn't turn out that way. By the time I was 12 years old, my father had rheumatoid arthritis at a very young age. My mother did have to get out and work and I helped her to take care of him. And when I finished college, then I was so happy to accept that responsibility. And my husband was very understanding too.

Paul Ortiz: What kind of work did your mother do?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: She did various things as receptionists and a manager of a restaurant on campus, that sort of thing. Let me tell you the most interesting thing. One of my father's friends came to Tuskegee to set up the Carver Museum back in the '40s, '39 or '40. You have been to the museum?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Okay. So every Sunday morning, Charles Dawson came to our house for breakfast. My mother was an excellent cook and she just enjoyed entertaining and so forth. We looked forward to it. By that time, my father was really an invalid and was bedridden. I listened in to these various conversations on

his progress at the museum and so forth.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: His wife had passed on, but his memory of her was so vivid. He just seemly enjoyed coming, talking about his wife who was passed on. Well, this was an early period, as I said, in which Tuskegee's faculty became integrated. I was still in college and there was a lady who was an artist as well, and she met Charles Dawson and they married. We just couldn't understand him.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Another wife, after he talked about that first one so very much. But they were very, very much in love. That was, I am pretty sure, Tuskegee's first interracial marriage on faculty level.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Then I grew up and the director of the Carver Museum was retiring and they needed a new person to replace her. I was already teaching art. And then I was given a second job responsibility and I became the director of the Carver Museum. And then I tried to remember all of the wonderful things that Mr. Dawson who set up the museum had discussed with my father, but I was kind of young to hold on to that.

Paul Ortiz: It's a wonderful museum.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I enjoyed my years there. I was the director for 15 years and then Tuskegee gave the museum to the Park Service and we have the historic site and we have the—I was in on the mutual agreement between the Department of Interior and Tuskegee University and it was a very profitable thing for both.

Paul Ortiz: Mrs. Thomas. Do you remember your grandparents?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes, I do. They were from North Carolina, Wilson, North Carolina. In fact, my mother and my father were playmates in Wilson, North Carolina. I remember my mother's mother, her father died I guess before I was born.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I remember my father's father who was elderly when I was born, but they were from the same place, city.

Paul Ortiz: Was it they who moved to Tuskegee or was it your parents?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: No, it was my parents. My father had several brothers who came here to school before him. It was sort of a tradition. He was the youngest.

Paul Ortiz: Nice.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: When he finished, then a new era began in that his daughter graduated and then my children and then I have a granddaughter who's in school who hasn't quite finished yet. It is a tradition, it's a certain sort of spirit that becomes a part of you.

Paul Ortiz: As the curator of the Carver Museum, did you have any experiences—Well, you did mention being present at the meeting between George Washington Carver and President Roosevelt.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes. I used to go over and talk with Dr. Carver. Can you imagine? I told you I was a very timid child and I don't know why there was only one adult on the campus that I felt free to go talk to. And that was Dr. Carver. He always called me little girl.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: He shared a lot of things with me. One day he reached into his pocket and brought out a ball of string. He knew my name was Elaine, but he'd always addressed me as little girl. He said, "Now this little girl." His voice was high-pitched. "This is what a you and a lot of people throw away, but I have a second use for everything and I will use this."

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Now, he didn't tell me what he was going to use it for. He was that kind of person, I understand, those who had a Sunday school class with Dr. Carver. He wouldn't answer a question directly, but he would give you that answer so you could figure it out for yourself. That was his nature. So pretty soon I saw him crocheting. I saw him knitting, and I saw the macrame, which Dr. Arthur. And he gave me a piece of it.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And another thing he gave me, you know he had a lot of byproducts of the sweet potato and the peanut. One day, he gave me a little jar of the peanut vanishing cream because they did produce it a short while.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I was too young to know its value. And I put it down on the campus to play. And when I got home, I told my mother about it and I didn't have it. Now, I was at least six years old. But years later, not too long ago, when I spoke in chapel on the life of Dr. Carver, I told that incident of him giving me that jar vanishing cream because he said, "Little girl, if you use this, put some cream on your face every day, you'll grow up and it'll make you a beautiful woman."

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I believed Dr. Carver, but I lost my vanishing cream. This lady called the museum. I was director of the museum then and left the message with the secretary there that she had a jar of the vanishing cream. She had an antique shop in town. She was White, of course. She still lives here and asked me to come by and I did.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I said, "I know she wants a fortune for it, but she wanted me to have it. She gave it to me." So I still have my vanishing cream, although I got it late. But Tuskegee was a wonderful place to grow up because it offered a lot.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I don't want to give the impression that it's not the same as it used to be. Well, very few places are. But it was the Mecca of the South and it did offer quite a bit.

Paul Ortiz: Now, you mentioned that as an undergraduate at Tuskegee, you would sit and study your

Professor Gomillion, he would talk about voting and importance, responsibility of political participation.

Paul Ortiz: Did you, at some point, get involved in politics at any level, '40s, '50s or your friends or hear of people who were involved?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: No, I really didn't. My involvement was perhaps because I played the organ and the piano. I would play for the programs, but I was never a speaker. I didn't become vocal in any way.

Paul Ortiz: Would you attend meetings?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yeah.

Paul Ortiz: What kinds of meetings?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: We had the Tuskegee Civic Association, which was organized Dr. Gomillion and it had a devotional beginning and I would play for the meeting. But I didn't. As I said, I can't recall ever participating vocally. I guess that's true with most musicians. They are heard, their music is heard.

Paul Ortiz: But you were there, so you were part of that history.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yeah. Sometimes I designed the covers for the programs because my field is music and art. That's where my involvement was.

Paul Ortiz: Did you begin—From what I understand from the little, I've heard about the Tuskegee Civic Association, one of its main projects was to help Black people in the area register to vote.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yeah.

Paul Ortiz: Did you, at some point, become registered?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I did. I did.

Paul Ortiz: What year was that? Can you tell me a little bit about the experiences that you had and difficulty in registering?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I'm trying to say. It seems as if I had some difficulty the first time and I had to go back and do it again. But I'll tell you what, I think the voting age was 21 at that time. So yeah, it was when I had just finished college and I became a registered voter.

Paul Ortiz: Also, when you turned 21?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yeah. Yeah.

Paul Ortiz: And did you register in Tuskegee?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes, I did.

Paul Ortiz: Okay. So you were one actually one of the trailblazers.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, I guess so. I hadn't thought about it like that because I'm 71 now, and when you think of it, that's 50 years ago, A lot of progress has been made. As I said, becoming registered was very difficult. I heard many, many people speak of it. I just was wondering if I was going to be fortunate enough to register, be able to register because there had been so much difficulty prior to my growing up, of getting registered.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: People were being denied.

Paul Ortiz: Would you hear about cases of racial violence against Black people in Macon County during those years?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes. They were the cases that were well known though. Like the Samuel Young case, I knew Sam and most of everybody knew that family and knew him. I knew the young lady. I knew the young lady who was president of the student government who, after that incident, led a group down and painted a streak of yellow on the statue.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, the Confederate—

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Mm-hmm. I guess she might have been about the second woman. My classmate was the first, I believe, who during the war years, there were no fellas left really to take on that kind of leadership.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: But when this incident happened, there were fellows on the campus. Yes, I have been around to see some various things happen. I'm happy it has been no worse because when people have conflicting ideas, they can become quite violent.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: It's good when they can talk things out and settle them that way. I remember when the students, I was operating the Carver Museum when they had that walk in Montgomery, the boycott, the bus boycott, all that.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: So many of our students participated and I think some of the faculty too. I couldn't close the museum and go. I could not.

Paul Ortiz: You mentioned earlier that Montgomery was the big town or one of the big towns.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: It was the largest city in Tuskegee.

Paul Ortiz: I'm curious or interested in those years, say in terms of the bus boycotts, it's 1954, what was the first time you heard about the rumblings about what was going on? There were faculty at Alabama State back then, right?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Right.

Paul Ortiz: So what was the first inkling that something was going on?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I remember Rosa Parks, when I believe she worked in a department store in Montgomery. My little girl, I had only one child then, was drinking some water. She was a little bit inquisitive and she wanted to see some White water.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: She wanted to drink some White water. This child of mine growing up with her mother and artist and her grandfather and artist had the concept that this water was painted.

Paul Ortiz: It was White water.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: My daughter, Janet, turned on the White water and then—Because she's been drinking the Black water, so I let her turn it on because she needed to turn it on so she could see it was the same.

Paul Ortiz: In Montgomery?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: In Montgomery. And that was in a department store. And then after that happened, I couldn't find her. It was quite an afternoon. She had gotten on the elevator and was fascinated and was just riding up and down on the elevator without the door opening.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: She was all right. Nothing happened to her. But it was that doubt thinking that someone could have harmed her. But I was sort of around and fully aware of things as they happened. I remember when Martin Luther King came to the campus and spoke. He was a commencement speaker.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I remember when he spoke and it was at a luncheon, and it wasn't much larger than this, not as large as this house. And the next time he spoke, the people were begging for seats. They wanted the students to get up and leave so that they could sit down to hear him.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes, I'm familiar with a lot of things that went on. One of my former students in Montgomery was a very, very close friend, he and his wife, to Martin Luther King. And I think he was with him at the time that his house was bombed in Montgomery. The wife and all was with his wife in downtown Montgomery. Yes, I've heard of a lot of things that have happened.

Paul Ortiz: So there was a lot of interplay or a lot of communication between people in Montgomery and people in Tuskegee?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes. If you knew them, if you were friends and so forth. And then through the Tuskegee Civic Association, we had meetings on Sunday afternoon at the churches. And some of the greatest of speakers came.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Again, I was there because I was playing the organ. I'll never forget the first time on a Sunday, I went to a little ice cream place and this gentleman opened the door and I turned around and looked at him. That's something you don't find too much. You're noted that day and time good with the women's liberation and all. Men didn't do that too much. They used to. And it was Jackie Robinson, the great baseball player.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: He was the speaker for that meeting that day. Through those organizations, we had the support of people all over the United States and it was well organized, I would say.

Paul Ortiz: Did you ever get the feeling, though, when you'd finish your musical program and people would begin speaking, did you ever get the feeling that all these people were pushing too far and there's going to be a backlash. I don't know if we can really get this accomplished? Was there ever was doubt?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I didn't—No, I didn't have any doubt and I didn't have any fear. I suppose it's a type of faith in religion that's been a part of you all of your life. When you've been through various circumstances and that faith and that trust and that religion has supported you, then such an event as that, you are still supported by that faith and that trust. It's sort of hard to describe.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Now, let me tell you, I'd go back so far is when they had the VA hospital and the Ku Klux Klan rode through the campus community with the lights on in their cars and the hoods on their faces. Now, I was a little girl when that happened. Now that was fearful because I heard the grown people talking about it.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: That was my first knowledge of such an organization. They came to the community on the same street where we built our house, Dr. Gomillion lived and they put a cross on his front yard. Now, that happened right here. That was a frightening experience because I was young when that happened.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And then when you hear about it from grownups who are talking, it gets even more frightening. But the things that happened in the later years are the ones that you are referring to. I didn't have the fear. I had the trust and the faith that they would work out. So interesting. After I had taught three years and I had a sabbatical leave to work on my master's degree. Without any intention of ever studying in Alabama, University of Alabama and Auburn University were not integrated.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: The state of Alabama provided a stipend for African Americans to study on a graduate level elsewhere. I received that stipend along with my sabbatical leave. That's why I have a degree

from New York University where I was going anyway. But now, as things happen, just a few years will make a difference.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: It was just the structure. You have to think of it. It was the structure. It was the thing that was accepted at that day and time. Auburn University, I never did enroll or apply or whatever, but they honored me as a distinguished woman of the South, along with eight women of the South in different professions: a lawyer, a doctor, an artist, so forth. Well, I was the artist.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Now, that's a school where I didn't go but the University of Alabama has invited me there several times. I've done—Well, I was a speaker in their women's studies. And then I've done two television documentaries at the University of Alabama.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: These are the same schools that denied Blacks. But I have a painting hanging there, I want you to see. Come look at just a little bit of it just from this angle. Then we'll go in there. You see the cross, you see right through there?

Paul Ortiz: Yeah.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Okay. That's what I wanted you to see. When I was at the museum, a minister of a Lutheran church right on the campus of Auburn, this is before integration, came over to the museum and asked me if I would participate in his religious art exhibition. Well, I wondered how on earth did he get my name anyway? But he came and I said, "Oh, sure, that's all I need is a deadline. I know I don't have a religious painting. I've always intended to do one and I just haven't gotten around to it." He said, "You have a month." And I did that painting.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And when it was exhibited, my mother was living and we went over to see it. And I did not want anybody to know I was the artist because I wanted to hear their comments. That was the most interesting thing, to hear the comments of the various persons who walked through and looked at the entire exhibition and to hear what they said about each of those paintings.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Everybody's painting, not only mine, but everybody's. Integration came about slowly. I have exhibited at Auburn several times and I've spoken there but there was a time when that was impossible. Now, I want you to know too that I didn't seek it. It just happened that I was invited as the years went by. I didn't.

Paul Ortiz: When did you begin exhibiting?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: When?

Paul Ortiz: Yeah. When was your first exhibit?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Back in the '40s. Maybe about '49 or earlier than that. I got it some sort of track

record there. It was in the '40s. It was in the '40s. I had to cut down on some of the things. They got to be too many, I thought, because I lived a long time.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: But the exhibition, do you know I was invited to the White House to set up an exhibit on George Washington Carver by the wife of the President of the United States? They flew the president's jet to Montgomery, to Maxwell Airbase for me and the exhibit, the students on the campus just—Oh, they just thought that was the most. But then that was a great experience. I never would've thought.

Paul Ortiz: Who was the president?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Nixon?

Paul Ortiz: Nixon?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Mrs. Nixon invited. I never did see him. I don't know if he was even there, but they had the opening of the exhibition and wanted me to stay. And the president of Tuskegee and his wife flew up for this very formal opening of the exhibition.

Paul Ortiz: Now, when you began exhibiting, were there particular challenges for a Black woman artist in the '40s, '50s you had to surmount, do you think?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I really—Let me tell you, if you look up there at that painting, you don't know the color of skin of who painted it. Your painting is exhibited without knowledge of whether your skin is Black or White.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Your painting speaks for you, just like you compose a piece of music and the world accepts it or enjoys it or rejects it, evaluating it for its worth. Maybe for that reason, I haven't experienced a lot of rejection. I probably should have. I can't think of an opportunity to exhibit in which I was denied. I think that's what you are really getting at because I am a Black woman.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: That has not been a struggle. It's so interesting because in the first place, there are not too many women in art and there are not too many Black women in art. It's just a handful of people who are definitely in it.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Our greatest—Two of the greatest contemporaries are Elizabeth Catlett and Jacob Lawrence. Jacob Lawrence will be at the Birmingham Museum for the opening of an exhibition this week, Thursday. I will be there, that I know him and Elizabeth Catlett as well.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: But have you noticed in the arts, although Marion Anderson was denied the opportunity to sing at a particular place at a particular time, there seems to be more acceptance in the arts due to the performance itself. All I can say is thank goodness if you excel in your art, that's not always true. It

just hasn't been denied of me. But there are others I'm sure, who have experienced hardship and have real talent and have never gotten on board.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Now, I chose the avenue of teaching. To teach, to operate a museum, to paint, to sculpt, to have a family was a big package, believe me. I really feel fortunate though, that things were as successful as they have been for me.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: I tried to encourage all young people. I dedicated my performance for Miss Senior Alabama and also for Miss Senior America. I took three of my paintings and a piece of my sculpture and I performed the piano in two minutes and 45 seconds.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Each contestant had no more than that time, but I dedicated it all to my more than 13,000 college students I've taught over 43 years because I feel that they have helped to mold me. And they have. I developed under their scrutiny.