

Elaine Freeman Thomas: —conditioner on. I think I must have by mistake turned it off. Okay.

Paul Ortiz: And you were telling me, Mrs. Thomas, that you were born in 1923?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes, I was born July 21st, 1923 in Cleveland, Ohio. My parents moved within six months to Tuskegee, where my father accepted a position as a professor on this campus, professing art and architecture. I was the only child, and remained the only child. I grew up here on this campus, visiting my father's classroom, walking across the street to visit with Dr. Kava, and then back home within five minutes because we lived adjacent to the campus.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: This was my world. Occasionally, we visited in nearby cities, Atlanta, places in North Carolina, so forth. But the whole matter of difficulties in race relations, I did not realize, until I had grown up a few years. This was a rather unusual environment. People of all races and colors and creeds came to the campus, and they were so welcomed that my father often invited them home for dinner. So until I reached a certain age, I suppose I was not fully aware of the conflicts that some people had created because of differences. I finished elementary school, high school, and college in this environment.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: However, in the second year of my junior year in college, the Rosenwald Foundation, which was based in Chicago, offered me a summer fellowship to Northwestern University. This was my first time leaving home, living and studying in an integrated society. It was highly successful. The next year, 1945, I graduated from college and was selected again, by Rosenwald Foundation, for a fellowship at Black Mountain College. The arts at Black Mountain College were on a level that you may consider European. And if we say that, we'll say that the arts sort of were a bit ahead of the new country America. Most of the professors were European, German, and came from the Bauhaus industrial art.

Paul Ortiz: In Germany?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Germany. Yes. My purpose for this selection was to integrate the college.

Paul Ortiz: There have been no Black students?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: There have been very few. They, I'm sure, were encouraged by Rosenwald Foundation. I was among the very first few. This book incidentally has been published to list the faculty and student roster. And not only were Black students, especially encouraged through fellowship, but Black faculty members, especially in music, Roland Hayes, whom the world will always remember, Carol Bryce, and others.

Paul Ortiz: So these are your teachers?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: These were my teachers. Now, in addition to these outstanding Afro-Americans, were the European teachers like Walter Gropius and Montgomery and Alexander Calder. I don't want to make this a name calling thing, but these are the great artists whom I had studied, but never thought that I would actually meet and have the opportunity of studying in that class and under their supervision. And it was all individual—Well, not all, but quite a bit of it was individual studio study. This was quite a success. I was much too young at 20, 21 maybe, to realize that something serious could have unavoidably happened. The Rosenwald Foundation sent a person here to Tuskegee to talk with my parents so that we would understand the risk, and said that I would remain on the train until we reached Asheville, North Carolina, and faculty members would board the train and escort me off.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: They did not know what reaction the very, very small mountainous town of Black Mountain would have on the effect of a Black student getting off of that train and going to the college, which was somewhat secluded in the mountains. As I said, it was a very profitable, enlightening experience to the Black students. There were just two of us. One young lady in music and I was in art at that particular time. We were learning and others were learning, and I am just so thrilled that it was successful with no type of conflict experience.

Paul Ortiz: There must have been challenges for you though. Do you remember having to overcome any kinds of barriers?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, there would just—?

Paul Ortiz: You're a trailblazer in that capacity.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, yes, certainly. I remember buying, well, yes, getting my ticket, my railway return ticket in a very small station, smaller than this room, but it did have two windows, on one side for White and around on the other side for Black.

Paul Ortiz: This was in Asheville?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: This is in Black Mountain.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, Black Mountain.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Which was 12 miles from Asheville, but of course your largest city was Asheville. And I recall, we have to think about not so much the Black student who may become angered or a bit aggressive, but the young White Northern student, who doesn't know how to cope with an experience of this sort. And this young man just couldn't understand why I had to buy my ticket at a different window, and he was determined that his ticket be sold from that same window. That sort of thing can cause conflict in a small town with people who are not ready for that.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, the ticket was sold to him and there was no conflict, but I want to tell you

that the people in the town stood across the street, and they came closer and closer until we were just surrounded. And of course, we didn't know what they may do. There were a few of us there, just the students. No faculty member was with us. Someone drove the truck or the car, and we all purchased our tickets that day. But nevertheless, I think some of them might have been seeing an African American for the first time because apparently there were none in that town. And these were all mountainous people with the long beards and the blue jeans and people I had not seen before. So we were sort of looking at each other for the first time. It was a glorious experience that I look back and I am happy that I lived through it and I enjoyed it at the age of about 20.

Paul Ortiz: Now, before you went to Black Mountain, did your parents, your mother or father, perhaps take you aside and say, "Elaine, you're going into a new environment, and these are some of the ground rules?"

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, the representative from Rosenwald Foundation had that held that type of expression with my parents and myself, and we sort of agreed that we were all willing. My family and I were thrilled that I could have this opportunity of study, and we took the risk, which really was a risk at that time. Now, there have been maybe a few other times. As I taught at Tuskegee, it was an—As I began to teach at Tuskegee back in '45, I had just graduated. I went to this study in Black Mountain and returned at the end of the summer to the faculty of Tuskegee. At that time, the faculty nor the students, were integrated, but I am so proud to say that I have learned, I have been a part of this development, which is a very positive development, to see this Black university integrated. As faculty members attend conferences all over, I attended my first conference in the South, in which I ended up being the only African American faculty member who accepted the invitation to come.

Paul Ortiz: And this was in arts and science?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: It was in the arts, and it was in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Oh my God. To say that this was a national organization of craftsman, art and craftsman, and it just so happened that I was [indistinct 00:14:50] who attended [indistinct 00:15:03] in that the students from a nearby—

Paul Ortiz: I think I might have a short.

Paul Ortiz: —talking about the conference in Gatlinburg.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes, that was an interesting conference. As you know, the American Craftsman Council was founded by the Vanderbilt family and Mrs. Vanderbilt was there. And I admired so much, her, I don't want to use the word control, but her concern for the matter, as she looked out and saw only one Brown face. And it happened at the time that the sit-ins were in sessions, and the lunch counters. And I think North Carolina had a very outstanding one, and it was in that timeframe. So I am sure there were some people who might have mistaken me for a person who had come for that purpose. Can you see how you can be misunderstood? And she conducted the opening session by having all—It was Southeastern Regional Conference of Craftsman. So she had all of the persons within their state to sit together and to sort of bind together in the conference.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And therefore, the faculty and students from two predominant colleges here in Alabama, University of Alabama was one, and Troy State University were present. I did not bring any students with me. I was the sole person from Tuskegee and the sole person from a Black college. I'm sure others had been invited, but they just did not respond. So again, the reaction was very interesting on the part of the students who attended.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: They realized, as they drove—I flew, but they drove from Troy and came through Tuskegee and turned north to Tennessee, and realized that here, they came right through this town. So at dinner, the professor told me that the students wanted to extend the invitation that I ride back to Tuskegee rather than fly back. There was a young man and a young lady, and one of the students owned the car, and he rode with them instead of driving. So that was a decision which I had to make, and I did what so many people do, slept on it. I told them the next morning that I would, and I would just cancel my ticket. So we did.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And the interesting thing about it was that when I arrived, my daughter answered the door, and I came back in a different way from the way I left. They took me to the airport, and here, her mother returns with strangers, so to speak. But she was most receptive and invited them in and they met my family, and that was a very pleasant and rewarding experience. Now, some people would consider what one of the craftsmen said to me as a questionable remark, because Mrs. Vanderbilt decided that since she didn't have her glasses, her eyeglasses with her, she wanted me to accompany her throughout the exhibition area, which was a bit unusual, but that was okay. I did and enjoyed it. As you know, in the crafts, you have weaving, and this craftsman was really into his thing, and he stopped when he saw this group come up to observe, and he put down the shuttle. You know what a shuttle is?

Paul Ortiz: Shuttle [indistinct 00:21:39].

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And he looked at me, which was very unusual, for a craftsman who is demonstrating to stop and talk to some person in the audience. But he asked me one question, "Are you from Pakistan?" Now, I had to answer that question. I had to answer it. I didn't really want to, but I made it very direct. And I answered, "No, I am from Tuskegee, and it is in Alabama." And that's all I said. Now, that showed the fact that he could not accept the fact that an African American was there. And I could see then why Mrs. Vanderbilt perhaps offered a bit of protection. So that experience, I think so sort of grew out of the fact that I had one of the greatest professors in sociology, Dr. Charles G. Gomillion as my teacher here when I was in college. And the things that he talked about that might come about at that time in the early forties were like dreams.

Paul Ortiz: What would he talk about?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, he talked about integration. And of course we had a textbook, but he would take it beyond that printed word so that we really could expect social change. And it did come about, but I was prepared for social change. I was prepared for studying. My first study out of the country in 1956 was in

Mexico City. And let me tell you the interesting thing. You're talking about mistaken identity. It was Aurtherine Lucy who applied the University of Alabama, and the governor stood in the door. Because I was in Mexico shortly after that time, they put the word out that I was Aurtherine Lucy.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And I had a time trying to convince people my name is Elaine Thomas. So okay, I didn't mind being mistaken for such a wonderful woman, but I was not Aurtherine Lucy. That was a very successful study. And then I studied 10 years later in Paris, and I just must tell you this, everybody's spoke French, even the policeman. Whatever I needed and wanted, I had to say it in French. And then finally one day on Bastille Day, bastille Day to the Parisians was like the 4th of July, here I saw a Black soldier, and I was a very, very shy person. If you can only realize that I was 15 years old before I ever spoke before an audience, I had a terrible case of timidity, and I didn't get out of it until I was in high school. But I did walk up to this young man, and I just thought he was some person who spoke English, and he didn't. And to make it so tough, he didn't even know what I was trying to say. I was introducing myself to him. And the French soldier—

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, he was French too, but the Caucasian soldier knew enough English to tell me what was happening, that this soldier was from a French island, and he did not in understand English, and he did not speak English. And both of them were very happy to meet me, and I just felt like two cents after such an experience. But I've had opportunity to travel, all of it being funded, as you can imagine, five times across the Atlantic Ocean, to France, to India. And of course, India is all together a different thing. Instead of the class system, there, they have the remnants of the caste system. And I don't know which is worse really, but it can be uncomfortable. And then three times in Africa. I find that very early in life, I felt that being accepted is a very important thing, and that there are ways which people more readily accept you.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: If you go into a situation or country, an atmosphere, and you are a minority, if you go with a smile on your face, first of all, and happiness in your heart, and then to the women of that country, you show your respect for their selection of clothes—Now, I do not wear American clothes in any country where I study. I dress as the women dress. I have 16 saris. I spent about four months in India, and I studied in 16 cities in India. And I was federally funded to collect fabrics for exhibition purposes. And I did, and I wore a different sari. And I was accepted by the women in India, so much so that at the time, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was living and invited us to the parliament.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And for an hour, we talked with her. It was a privilege. It was a great woman. And she stopped to say that—Well, she commented about the sari Mrs. Thomas was wearing, and that made me feel very good because we had been told that sometimes people do not wish for you to imitate them or to pick up their habits. So I find that sometimes we should consider a little more effort to accept people of different beliefs and customs by showing them respect and using what they use, and especially their clothes. That isn't always too delightful to eat the food, but get accustomed to that.

Paul Ortiz: Now, Mrs. Thomas, you were in the classroom with your Professor Gomillion.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes.

Paul Ortiz: And you spoke about he really being on the cutting edge in a sense. Was there a sense of danger in the classroom that he was teaching, something that was perhaps unsanctioned?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Oh, no, no. It was not that type of opinion or—He simply brought to life the contemporary social actions that were in process. Because in the forties, if I graduated in '45, to be very honest with you, we studied, naturally in sociology, the effect of the vote and the important commitment that we should make when we reach that age. And to be very honest, at that particular time, I didn't learn this in the classroom, it was just a common knowledge that many Blacks were denied the vote by asking them questions, let's say about the constitution that hardly any person could answer, and that would deny them that privilege to vote.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And of course, there were all sorts of measures built in. So here was a college professor who was encouraging us to register to vote when we became of age. It was that kind of lecture and relevance of sociology to our immediate lives. I knew Dr. Gomillion from childhood almost because he and my father were on the faculty at the same time. So I grew up with his daughters. One was my classmate, and I felt very privileged to have a class with him because he is still a very knowledgeable person. He lives in Washington, DC, and I hear from him occasionally.

Paul Ortiz: What was student life like at Tuskegee in the early forties?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Oh, that's a whole book. The men were off in the army. The war was on. My freshman year was 1941. And within a few months, the young men were getting those telegrams greetings. Uncle Sam wants you, and you were drafted and you had to go. So when my class graduated in 1945, from college, there were about four young men who marched in that class. And I guess they were the four Fs. They had some type of physical difficulty. So the young ladies operated, maintained this campus. Can you imagine?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: This was a campus where in the forties, we marched to chapel in uniform from White Hall down Campus Avenue. Chapel was Sunday morning at 10:30 and on Sunday night at 6:30, and Wednesday night at six 30. And back in that time, the young ladies sat on one side, the young men sat on the other side. Oh, can you imagine? I'm that old, but that's the way it was. And the management of the campus, by work study students, was thrust upon women. We took welding. We took auto mechanics. I had three jobs.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: When I worked full-time during the summer, I had a clerical job in the dean's office in mechanical industries, I was the cashier in the cafeteria, and three evenings a week, I was a secretary to the chaplain. And I had plenty of money. At that time, they did not pay cash. However, they pay vouchers so I just had loads of money for my books and for my tuition and for anything that I could pay by voucher. It produced a certain kind of independent woman. When my classmates come back for reunion, they're all women. They'll come back next March, April for the 50th class reunion, and I doubt if there will be one man in the group. But we learned how to do everything that had to be done on that campus, physical labor, as

well as clerical. However now, don't think the whole area was void of young men. We had the Air Cadets here, so we met them and we married them.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: And the social life wasn't just dead. There were new people we were meeting. And part of their training was on campus, and then they came over to the campus for various social events, and then we went out to the base for various social events.

Paul Ortiz: Did you begin dating at that time or—?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Oh yes. Well, high school really, high school. I married my first boyfriend, my high school boyfriend. And at one time, Tuskegee had a boarding high school, so young people from all over the United States, California, Chicago, especially the big cities, came here to high school. When I look back, I think I would not have changed my growing up. I'm happy that I had the experiences at the time that I did, and I'm happy that I grew up here in Tuskegee. Sometimes I find that people who live in a large city can sometimes have a lot of bitterness because people don't agree with them. And I find that growing up on an educational campus where the focus at that time was certainly in the arts, upon the arts and the sciences, and there was a certain type of protection—. Of course, you can't do it today.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: You notice I have—Well, I have my door unlocked because you are sitting in here. But at that time in Tuskegee, your front door was open, and you couldn't do that in Chicago and New York even at that time. So I like too, the fact that everybody knew you in the whole town. All races knew you. They knew your parents.

Paul Ortiz: Now, did your family have a particular status, considering that your father was a faculty member at Tuskegee? What was the social—?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Well, yes.

Paul Ortiz: —life like, in other words?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: As I think about it and compare it to other places that I've been, like Paris and New York and Chicago, it was not a very, very busy social life. It was life pertaining to the social entertainment of a college campus. We went to Montgomery, Alabama, which was our largest big city. We went to Atlanta for various social events and shopping.

Paul Ortiz: With your family?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Yes. My father exhibited in the Montgomery Museum in Montgomery, which was where he was perhaps the first Afro-American to do so. I remember going to see his work hang there in the exhibition. So in a sense, as I look back, I don't think I really had the hardships that some girls growing up in the big cities had, because this was a rather sheltered place.

Paul Ortiz: Were there special occasions or events or celebrations that would bring the Black community in Tuskegee together during those years?

Elaine Freeman Thomas: Oh, yes. Yes. The campus provided so much of that. For example, the Tuskegee Institute had one of the most foremost hospitals in this region, John Andrew Memorial Hospital, and it had an annual clinic in the spring of the year. This is just an example of one event, and people came from all over the United States to this occasion. There were things like the Business League and the Farmer's Conference. And of course, I was on hand when the president of the United States—We've had several presidents to come here. I have forgotten how many. It's been at least six or seven.

Elaine Freeman Thomas: But Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to Tuskegee to see Dr. George Washington Carver, and I was standing right there as a student. And to witness the joy on the faces of those two gentlemen, and I just stood there to say, oh, just think he's shaking hands with the greatest scientist here in America, and the greatest scientist is shaking hands with the greatest president there has been. So yes, we had an entertainment series that brought the world's best—