

Community Archive Center Oral History Project Transcript
Dr. Thelma Jackson, Interview date: 5/11/2023

dindria barrow : 00:01 Hello, this is dindria barrow of the Community Archive Center of Tacoma Public Library. I am in the main branch of TPL, and it is May 11th, 2023. I am here with

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 00:16 Thelma Jackson.

dindria barrow : 00:19 It is so good to see you Thelma. How are you today?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 00:21 I am so well, thank you. How are you?

dindria barrow : 00:24 I'm doing all right, you know, making it through. I really am excited to hear your story. So, we're gonna start right away with prompt number one, name some of the places, people, or things you call home.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 00:45 I haven't had very many different places in my life. I grew up in the deep South in Prichard, Alabama, outskirts of Mobile down on the Gulf Coast of Alabama. I was there until I went to college in Baton Rouge, Louisiana at Southern University. There for some memorable years of my life. And then upon graduation from Southern, uh with a degree in biochemistry, I was recruited to the state of Washington in 1968 by Battelle Northwest to the Hanford Project in eastern Washington. And that long trek across country to an absolutely alien territory for me having, lived all my life up to that point in the deep south. My family and I spent, about three years in the Tri-Cities before relocating to, the Olympia Lacey area for my husband. Went to work for state government, and there we have been for the last 54 years. So, there's not been many different places, a long trajectory, but a very short one. And having lived all of my adult life, so to speak, in the state of Washington, is certainly where I now call home. My roots continue to be in Alabama, but Washington has certainly become my home, my children, my family's grown up here, my grandchildren, so this is definitely home for me.

dindria barrow : 02:34 Can you name some of the people that you call home?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 02:39 Some of the people that I call home, I would have to think back to my younger years in Alabama. I lost my mother at age 13, my age 13. And I often characterize myself as truly a child of the village, my community, my teachers. The grounding you know, I'm often asked, what influences, happened in your life that you turned out to be the kind of adult you are. And I have to think of my schools, as particularly my high school, Blunt high school in Prichard, Alabama, where I kind of cut my teeth on leadership,

cut my teeth on. Well, really from the very beginning with assurance and reassurance that I was gifted, I was talented. And, that all Black educational setting, they made sure I knew and understood the burdensome role of being, you know, in the Black community label, the chosen one.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 04:03

So all of the support, all of the love, all of the guidance that was, of course the first home. Southern University, being an HBCU, historical Black College and University, a lot of the same kind of nurturing and love of my Black professors, continued that trajectory for me. You know, your whole life, not allowed an inch of deviation from excellence. Now, you know, you can do better now, I expect, but I got 95. Yeah. But a hundred is what you are capable of doing. You're slacking, you know, that kind of, and those were the things that, contributed to the strong belief in myself that there was nothing I could do, couldn't do. That what I didn't know, I knew where I could look to find it I, and on and on and on.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 05:13

And once we arrived in the state of Washington, June 12th, 1968, I remember very vividly, arriving in the Tri-Cities, having driven from Alabama over a five day period, wheat fields and desert, and sage brush and tumbleweeds. It was like, oh my God. Well, have we gotten ourselves into, and, you know, you're in an air-conditioned car and driving alone and not paying very much attention. And we rolled into the Tri-cities, and the bank reader board said 115 degrees. What? So, the culture shock of climate, geography, hardly any Black people where we were in Richland, where Battelle was located. So, it was just shocks one after the other. But my upbringing, prepared me for it. What am I coming to? I was coming to a young scientist program that I had been, recruited for with students from all over the country, of course, coming from a lot of the bigger schools with resources galore, and I'm coming from my little Black HBCU, but I didn't feel inferior at all.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 06:37

I felt in no way that this would not be a job I couldn't do. So, the upbringing and the background and the leadership and the belief and the sense of self-worth and the self-esteem, really prepared me. So, I'm coming out of a 100% integrated, I'm sorry, segregated right environment, coming to a place where I'm interacting for the first time in my life with white folks, <laugh> as a 21-year-old adult. Okay. But the wisdom of those Black teachers, those Black professors that have prepared me for the integration that I was now in the midst of. And, you know, you don't give it any thought when it's happening, when

you're living in it, but you look back and say, that's why Mrs. Mentor kept harping on me to do this. Yes

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 07:41

This is why, you know, Mrs. Smith, would not let me get away with, you know, nothing, you know, one misspelled word, and I got a lecture, you know, why, you know what you want me, you have the capacity, you know, to do a hundred percent of these words, you know, just, you're getting sloppy. You're get, you know, so always pounding the goal of excellence in me. And so when I arrived in this integrated environment, they had prepared me, better than they'll ever know, <laugh>, although I've told them since, better than I ever expected. And so, coming to Washington, we arrived in Richland, and we said, where are the Black people? where, you know, and one of the first Black people I saw was my newspaper carrier who delivered a newspaper. You know, who are you? What's your name? Where are you folk?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 08:44

You know da da da da da, but it didn't take us very long to discover East Pasco. That's where the Black folk were. The holdovers from the Hanford construction days under the viaduct, across the tracks. This is where they settled after Hanford was built, and the atomic bonds manufactured and all that kind of stuff. They came with the railroads and construction crews, and just found a wonderful, you know, Black community over there just in need of some help and some nurturing. And we rolled up our sleeves and got right in, you know, so we were there for three years before relocating to Western Washington. And we're talking about having been a beneficiary of federal affirmative action programs. That's the other thing I'll say, I am a child of the village, and I'm a product of affirmative action. And had it not been for affirmative action that demanded that those federal contractors on the Hanford Project integrate that workforce, they never would've come to those Black college campuses, right.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 09:58

Seeking engineer science, you know majors like that. And so, it's, it's that route that I followed, and it was because of that, that I'm, you know, 52 years later, still in the state of Washington, and affirmative action has changed so much that it's become a negative, as opposed to what it was intended to be. So, any speeches I make, or any presentations that I do, I make it clear that I am a product of affirmative action. Had it not been for affirmative action, I would not be in the state of Washington, and then I, you know, make the comment. And

had I not been to the state of Washington, you would've missed out on me all these years.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 10:49

So those are the kind of people and the kind of things that I call home. And so now with three children, all college graduates, four grandchildren, college graduates, all entrepreneurs, all businesspeople, community activists, and it all came from my upbringing of, you know, my folk wouldn't, my folk wouldn't allow me to complain about nothing. It was always, so, what are you gonna do about it? And I asked my kids and grandkids the same thing, you know, no complaints around here. So what do you plan to do about it? And so they instilled in me a sense of responsibility to serve, to lead, to give back. And I've tried to pass that on through the people I've interacted with as mentors, as mentees. I mean, young, old. And it's not just a, a, a young person kind of thing.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 11:55

And so I attribute, my interest in service back to those days of school boarding. I don't mean school boarding, school leadership, first girl president of my student body, you know, that kind of thing, with teachers saying, you can do this, but there's never been a girl. Well, you can be the first <laugh> kind of thing. And so that kind of thing, just that I can do, you know, just because it hadn't been done before doesn't mean it can't be done, kind of thing. And so those are some of the places, people, things that I call home that all contributed in different ways, to me and who I am, and my belief system, and my value system, and my groundedness.

Dindria barrow : 12:49

Yes. Thank you so much. Some of these questions are gonna overlap, and so you can decide to take them whatever way you want to. We can go deeper into like, your values and beliefs, or we can name more people and places and things. But who are you and where do you come from? And you've answered a lot of this question already, but who do you think you are now as opposed to who you were then?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 13:22

I did not grow up with a sense of history. I didn't grow up with either set of grandparents. I didn't have older aunts or uncles. So the older generation, I had an older father. As I said, I, my mother passed when I was 16. And in that totally segregated environment, I was a happy-go-lucky child, you know? Of course, when I went to college and you start taking sociology and that kind of stuff, I learned we were poor, the word poverty based on the such-and-such percentage of the da da da. I said, oh, my lord, I was poor. But we lived in a house in a

neighborhood on the street. We weren't in any projects of that kind of thing. My father was a civilian employee at the local Air Force base we had a family structure where we sat down to dinner every day starting with grace.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 14:29

It was just a routine, you know? And there were kids up and down my street that didn't have that kind of setting, but we were all in the same boat. We were all in that same socioeconomic strata, but we did not consider ourselves poor. We were happy, we created games, we made toys. We, I was a tomboyish, tree climber, roller skate, a bicycle rider. In the summertime, I ran a school in my backyard on the dirt, <laugh> and all the little neighborhood kids sitting on the benches and doing their homework scratching in the ground. And it just kept coming about coming back to those words, you know, for those that are given much, much as expected. So even as a 12, 13-year-old, I was teaching. And it was interesting how from 10 to two, there was weren't kids moving around on my street they were all in my backyard in summer school

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 15:39

And I thought back on that, you know? so that's the environment I came from. Poor but not impoverished. And I had to learn the difference between that, because we were happy, we were nurtured, we were loved, we were highly disciplined by everybody in the community and that's the environment from which I came, and it made me who I am. It made me who I am and, you know, different things happen. Different things come up that that caused you to reflect back on your growing up years said, oh, now I understand this. So now I understand that of whatever the case might be. And when my mother passed when I was 13, and I had three younger siblings, I had to grow up real quick and in a hurry.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 16:45

I was the oldest of those four children, between my mother and father. It was, we were a blended family. My father had older children. My mother had older children. I was the oldest of the four they had together. And so, I ran our household. I was a woman of the house. I had to learn to manage money. I had to learn to make it stretch. I had to make sure younger sisters and brothers, you know, I think back on that as a good lord, I've been grown a long time, <laugh> a long time. So, I got a jumpstart on adult decision making. And, you know, that kind of thing and you wonder why, God, why did you do that to me? Kind of thing, you know? And I got to a point where I accepted it and said, there's a reason.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 17:38 And in time you'll let me know what that reason is. But it was all in preparation for the adult He wanted me to be. And so, as a 16, 17-year-old, you know, I stayed a kid. I mean, there, I'm running my school's council and was valedictorian with a 4.0 in spite of the adult responsibilities I had of cooking, grocery shopping, budgeting, you know, younger siblings. And it was nothing but the Lord and his angels that were with me all the way. And so, that's who I am. I'm a when you asked me who am, a rather complex human being, a rather complex human being that, whose purpose, for the footprint I make, and the carbon I take up was put in place a long time ago, a long time ago.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 18:49 And so I've just tried to be obedient to my purpose and my calling. And I'm not an overly religious person, but I do feel as though I have a strong connection with God. And I do believe he talks to me, and I've learned to listen. And that has a lot to do with my gardening. My, you know, and I'm out in my yard, and the bunny rabbits are hopping around, and the squirrels are scampering up the trees. And right now, I'm just enjoying the trees in bloom, and the flowers growing. And I just sit there and say, Lord, how can people not believe in a power, whatever they call it, whoever you know, and you just say, thank you, Lord. You know, thank you for your guidance. Thank you for the strength, the courage, the know-how, the wisdom, the whatever, because I've just been a vessel.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 19:42 And so when you ask me where do I come from I really don't know beyond growing up in Alabama. I've become an interested historian of late. I've been, because I didn't grow up around grandparents, older aunts, uncles. And it didn't dawn on me that I should have been interviewing my father before he passed. So, I become interested in my African roots from whence did I come. And so, I knew there was white intermingling in my background, like so many Blacks. I think my grandfather on my father's side. But I never asked my father about that. I never, never learned that story. So, I was interested in my lineage, my genealogy. And so, when ancestry.com came along, 23 and me, and it was one, there's a third one, there's a third one, because I, I subscribed to all three.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 20:54 And being that the, the scientist that I am, I made sure that, , same time lined up my three vials, same day, same condition, and, sent my samples back. And I was very anxious to compare yes, the results and not just depend on ancestry.com, or, you know, and I was just amazed at how close the three were.

Absolutely amazed. And they just sent tons of information and links to this, and links to that. And I've not had the time to follow up on that. And one of my goals before I leave this world is to develop that history of my family for my children and grandchildren, so they don't have to wonder, you know? So, this stuff tells me, you know, what part of Africa we came from, and my people landed in South Carolina and da, da da, da, da, you know?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 21:52

But when I think in terms of my father having been born in 1894, that makes me only three generations removed from slavery. And so, I share that with my grandkids and kids, and they are always full of questions. And so, I want more answers for some of those questions they ask, because they have become curious about, grandma, what was your grandma like? And I have to say, I have very little, they weren't around me. They were gone before I came along. So, I don't know. So, I had to research to find out their names and where they, you know, so I share what I can, but it's so much more with all of the genealogy technology that's out there now, but you know, it's addictive. You start following those cold leads and those little leads start dropping in and said, oh my God, you know, my father fought in World War I, all right, world War I, and I actually found his enlistment card.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 23:01

Oh, I've been able to research census records, and, you know, but that stuff takes time. It does. And so, part of that had to give me the interest in this particular book that I wrote, because coming to Thurston County, you know, I was curious about, the where are the Black folk <laugh>? Where are the Black folk? I've heard all about George Bush in the settlement of Tumwater. And, you know, came across the plains in the late 18 hundreds, I said, but from 1900 to, you know what was going on? And so this book really captures 1950 to 1975, which gave a chance to get oral interviews of a lot of the people who were still alive. And I've said, 1900 to 1950, the research is gonna be archival. But from 1950 to 1975, just to give it a cutoff time, so many these people are alive now.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 24:02

And before they're dead and gone. And so, this chronicles, where they came from, what brought them here, what kind of experiences did they have, successes, joys happiness, you know, talks about the treatment in the schools, the housing discrimination, the redlining, the racially restrictive covenants on property. And it answered a longstanding question on my part. And a lot of people, why do most Blacks in Thurston

County live out in the Lacey area? Not Olympia, not Tumwater. And it was because of the housing discrimination and the racially restrictive covenants that our research turned up, and the coding of the data and the themes that surfaced from those oral interviews. When you asked what were some of the experiences you had when everybody talked about housing discrimination and the difficulty in finding somewhere to live. And a lot of people, you know, by that time, affirmative action was entering into state government and federal government.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 25:07

So a lot of Blacks literally commuted from Tacoma, you know, all those areas into Olympia every day for years, because they couldn't find housing. But those who did live there, you know, have a lot of their stories, a lot of their experiences. And when the book came out, there was a lot of interest. I've done a lot of speaking and presentations to Rotaries and Kiwanis and Lions and historical commissions, and, you know, and now with the cutoff time here being 1975, so many more Blacks have come to Thurston County, and we are living everywhere. Olympia, Tumwater, Yam, or, I mean, we're everywhere. So, it's almost 50 years since 1970. It'll soon be 2025. But, you know, we had to cut it off somewhere, <laugh> to make it manageable, like doing a painting. And at some point, you say, this is it.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 26:03

Not finished, but this is it. So, for that 50 year period of time, tried to capture as much as we could. And we've discovered a, some people that's not included in the book, that, you know, so a second edition is due, but then a whole new book that picks up from 1976 to the present and then there's that whole 1900 to 1950. That's just sitting there, and so a lack of knowledge about my own history is what prompted me to want to do the book. So that as others came into Thurston County and the state of Washington, they would realize that there were pioneers ahead of them that broke down those housing discrimination barriers. Yeah, you're living in Olympia, you're living in Tumwater, but you need to understand what the area was like. And then the whites would say, well, most of the Blacks around here live out in Lacey. They're all, they're mostly military, so they wanna be near the bases. And so, my family was not military, you know? But anyway, all of that is who I am and where I came from and what makes me who I am today. So many things that, different pressure points on me, and collectively here I be.

dindria barrow : 27:32

<laugh>, I feel, is, oh my goodness. We could end there, because that is the greatest way to end, but you'll have to just

say it again after the next question. Okay. Alright, <laugh>, because I like when you say "here I be". The next question is trying to look towards the future. And, and I think that you've led us into thinking that, you know, as a writer, a researcher, an archivist, a oral historian, I would call you.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 28:01

A scientist.

dindria barrow : 28:02

And a scientist, you have so many places that you can go, with your future, but what is the, what is your past and how does that tie to your future dreams?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 28:20

My past has been one of challenge of, venturing into new horizons, being willing to take risk when I think of the many boards, commissions, task forces, the things that were recipients of that leadership development in me a long time ago. And when I look at the world today, Black people are in a different place than where we used to be as a people. And it's like so much is being revisited, rehashed. We're having to fight some very critical battles over again, things as basic as the right to vote, things as basic as education, things, as basic as access to quality healthcare, it is just so much that we had moved on from thinking that was settled, and that was decided. And no, it has impacted our ability to think of the future because we are having to back up and deal with the past again, because our presence is so impacted by things going on around us, a hatred, a racism, a meanness, and we are still the object of a lot of that stuff.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 29:58

So there are a lot of others that are in that box with us now, and you know, some conversations with different people over the years, and I had no idea what you all were putting up, what you all were putting up with. I had no idea of what you were trying to explain to, you know, and on and on and on. So, you're forever in this monotonous teaching mode. And my dream, one of my dreams is that one day, I can get to 4, 5, 6 x, y, z not having to start with ABC 1, 2, 3 over and over and over again. So, I've seen the terminology shift. I was talking about affirmative action back in the sixties, that we went through this period of the seventies in the eighties, and now in this 2000 era, everybody's talking about DEI diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 31:02

And most people who talk about it really don't have the slightest idea what it is and what it needs to look like. And I chair the Lacy Equity Commission, this is the first commission, and I decided I want to make a difference in this community. Let

me, let me make available what I know and know how to do to the city in this capacity of putting a commission in place from the ground up. So I'm the chair, I was the first chair, and, you know, this is my community. I wanted to be open, welcoming, I don't wanna see. And then I served 20 years on the Northwestern School Board because education became a passion when my oldest child started school and, you know, room mother and PTA and PTA president, and, you know, huh? So those, the folks that's making all the rules, that's where I wanna be.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 32:03

So 20 years on the school board. So, I've had to, you know, get accustomed to being an elected official, and people who deny that to be a school board member isn't a politician, don't know what they're talking about. Education is some of the most ruthless politics around. And so, as I look at what's happening in the schools, as I look at the, the, the book banning and the, oh, it's just horrible what's going on, the denial of ethnic studies for students of color, and particularly Black students. And so, it's hard to think about moving forward because there's so much work that's being called for right now, that if some things don't happen and some things don't change, the future looks pretty gloomy, pretty gloomy for kids for the generations, yet born with some of the public policy being put in place, for schools and education and colleges and universities.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 33:05

It's not just the K-12 system. And so, it's, oh my Lord, I thought we had settled that. But no, we have not. So the dream is kind of fuzzy right now, because when I look at, the fact that at age 77, in the prime of my golden years, how am I going to choose which challenges, which task, which whatever's, while I still have my mental capacity, my physical ability, where can I best put my resources. To use, given what will be, what we're being challenged with now, in my community, in the state, in this nation, democracy is under fire. If we don't take care of some things that's going on now, the future looks very grim. The world from the point of view of America losing its senses, you know, and the way we are perceived by the rest of the world, is very difficult to think of let's say 2025 and beyond.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 34:34

And here we are in 2023. There are some things that need the immediate attention, need immediate attention of 2024, 2025, you know, and beyond. There are some things need some immediate attention and mostly of a political nature, of an ecological nature. What, what's the world gonna look like? Well, we have a world, it's going to hell in a hand basket at every, the

economy, the meanness, the hatred, the homelessness, the housing crisis. I mean, it just goes on and on and on. So, okay, Lord, show me a sign. Which of these human problems am I to focus on? You can't do everything. So, what am I to focus on in these years you're giving me while I'm still here? What, what do, what will you have me do? And I'm still listening. He kind of nudges me every now and then. So, this book was part of it. Part of the answer. I don't know if I'll live to see the archival research that goes in the 1900 to 1950. I'm just trying to mentor people. I'm just trying to garner interests so that, you know, identify folk could pick up this baton and move on. And, from 1976, you know, go to the next level, because I do believe in succession planning.

dindria barrow : 36:06

All right. Please tell us what succession planning is.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 36:09

Succession planning is making sure that you are depositing whatever knowledge, wisdom, know-how in the next generation, so that with my passage, it doesn't go to the grave with me. I've left it, I've nurtured, I've mentored, I've taught, I've imparted, so that whatever goes on, whatever young historian out there, and I've identified a few of em now you gotta pick this up and take an, you know, I'm depending on you, you know, right now is, is the political season. Next week is the filing period for offices, local offices. So, I've been busy trying to recruit folk to run for the local school board, run for the city council. You know, that's where the change is going to come at the ground level, because the national level is out of control. all politics are local.

dindria barrow : 37:13

Right on. I'm learning so much from you.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 37:17

But who's out there? You know? Yes. No, I'm interested in the, in the education system and the children in the school board, but I just don't think I'm up to par. I said, what is it you think you need to be; do you think the white folk on the school board, on the school boards, you know, came into it up the bar? You know, so I have to do these talks and, and so I'm hand carrying people next week to file for stuff, you know? That's the session planning. And I'm saying we need Blacks on the school board, the city council, the county commission, planning commissions, everywhere, everywhere. And, and one or two of us don't have to be work to death anymore. There's enough folk to spread it around. Well, I don't know about this. Well, what are you interested in?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 38:07 Well, I think one day I might wanna be a school board member. Well, you need to start going to school board meetings. I think I might wanna be a city council person one day. Then you need to start going to city council meetings, you know, and just trying to say, just, just observe. Go on the website, you know? and I'm working with kids, you know, what do you think you wanna be? I think I wanna be an attorney one day or a judge or whatever. Okay, let's map out in reverse engineering. How you going to get there? You're a sixth grader now. Right? Okay. Let's get you set up for middle school. And so when you start high school where your grades begin to count and your accredits begin to count, and you begin to start thinking about college, you know, how does one become a judge?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 38:55 You know? And no one's taking time, you know, and it's not just Black kids, it's just, you know, any kid, I don't care who you are. If you're showing me some interest that want some help, and, you know, so be it. Every, all these young folk are our next generation. But I'm certainly prioritizing Black kids. And then there's a whole quadrant of biracial children, Black and something else totally lost, don't know anything about the Black side of their being. I just haven't had the energy, you know, to try and work with those, parents to say, you, what kind of Black history books do you have in your home? What kind of events do you expose your child to? They've got to know that they are bi or multiracial or whatever, and they need to understand every aspect.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 39:51 You know? Well, my husband is Black, and I'll say, have, do your kids go south to get to meet their Black relatives? You know? And so, I don't mind kind of challenging or thought process, so, well, you're doing 'em a disservice. They need the other side of, they need to know the other side of their being, you know? So, what is it God will have me do in these remaining years? And another message that came through strong and clear, we have a large Black Baptist church in Lacey, and it's undergone some terrific leadership kinds of whatever's. And we now have a new pastor. And I was the chair of the pastoral search committee, and I feel very strongly that our community needs a strong Black church. And so, we successfully did a nationwide search, hired a new pastor, and we're getting ready for his installation the end of the month.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 41:02 So he certainly told me, I need you to help me get my church in order. You can't ask the question if you don't want the answer, <laugh>. So, you know, I've hired college presidents that I've

hired CEOs, is, you know, I've conducted searches for this, that, and the other. And I get out in the yard and I'm starting to talk, and to God, what Lord me. And I have prepared you for such a time as this. So, you know, I was on the board of trustees at the Evergreen State College and president of that board when Governor Evans was the president of the college. So I had all this experience, you know, in executive searches. And so a pastor's just an executive search. I knew how to do focus groups and, you know, ask congregations, what do we want in our next pastor?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 42:05

What qualifications, whatever's. And so, we have a delightful new pastor, and he answers all of the criteria. The church is stabilizing, the church has falling into place. He has brought the skillset, the talent, administrative wherewithal, the technological, you know, and we are moving people that we lost even before Covid. They're coming back every Sunday. We've got eight, nine new people stepping forward to join. And he's so community minded to say the church isn't just about Sunday. And so that's what's been so missing. We haven't had pastoral leadership in the community. And so, I'm just as pleased as punch <laugh> with my new pastor so I can, you know, move on, you know, to whatever, and know that the stability that I had hoped for and prayed for is coming true. And it was nothing but the Lord that gave me that job of not just being on the pastoral search committee but sharing it and leading it under a lot of adversity.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 43:17

And a lot of, you know, that's another whole story. That'll be a chapter in my autobiography that I'm trying to get the time to work on, because I, just human nature and even in a church setting, you know, what you, the crap you have to put up with and the sabotage and the ambush and the pushback, you know? And so, what's, what's in store for me for the remainder of my life? I don't know. So, I dream of a world where truly DEI is a reality. The diversity is now there right now to get the inclusion and the equity, not the equality. Because we thought we had equality and we thought integration was gonna be the answer. And oftentimes when I'm speaking to groups or presenting to groups, I make the statement, one of the best things that ever happened to me is that I missed integration.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 44:32

You know? Then I go on to explain, I had no kindergarten. You went straight into first grade. So, my first through 12th grade, pure Black teachers, administrators, the whole thing, go to HBCU and, and then being although *Brown vs. Board* passed in

1954, George Wallace was the governor who declared segregation now. segregation forever. And so, Alabama schools didn't integrate until 1968. I graduated high school in 1963. And so, the beginning of the integration, of course they took the top Black students in those Black schools and sent them to the white schools to be mistreated. And so, I missed all that. I could focus on being the best I could be development of, of self-worth, self-esteem, then going to an HBCU. It was further carried on. So, by the time I relocate to the state of Washington, to the Hanford Project wasn't nothing. They could, they, nobody could tell me I couldn't learn. I, you know, but had I been in an integrated setting, coming up as a teen, all that nasty treatment and being somewhere folk didn't want you, you know, I wouldn't be where I am today. I wouldn't not be where I am today. So, the best thing that could have happened to me is that I missed integration.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 46:09

And so I just look back on it, and I've been going back to my high school reunions. This is number 60 this year, the first year I won't be going back. And then I'm the class historian. So, you know, our history, talk about, we live through the first man on the moon. And you know, and on and on and on, recounting the historical things has happened in our lifetime. And I have a section of our class history where I talk about what, what, what came out of our class, class of '23 or 4, something like that. Four of us with doctorate degrees, principals, teachers, librarians, nurses, you know, out of our little Black high school, they printed Alabama. And, and those for years, those of our teachers who were still alive, we brought them to our class reunions in limos, <laugh>, and thanked them all right.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 47:13

Thanked them, but for the kids who had, who come up and, you know, haven't had that kind of setting, it's been a struggle. Yeah. It's been a struggle. And so, to dream about a future, which certainly has to be informed by the past. But inclusivity, equitable treatment, equitable opportunities, joy, peace and happiness as much as humanly possible for all mankind, humankind, but certainly for Black folk that's been so subjected to so much for over 400 years. So, I really got off into the 1619 project. I mean, <laugh> Nicky, Hannah Jones, and that whole crew. And then something else happened. This was '23. It must have been our class reunion. Class reunion '58. They had just discovered the Clotilda, the last slave ship that, you know what I'm talking about? Yes. Right there, off the shores of Mobile.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 48:39 I grew up seven miles from Africa Town and never knew, never knew the history. Yeah. Never knew the history. And oh my God, it just, it just, and part of our weekend activity, our agenda for the class, we did a riding bus tour with a tour guide. And they showed us all this. And, I said, oh my God, I was in walking distance. Of Africa Town. And so now they've located the ship and they find that the whole of the boat was preserved in the mud. And they got all these barges, and all these scientists came in there and, they're trying to figure out when they're gonna lift. Yeah. Cause they had found pieces of the wood and the map, but they deep sea divers and all they have, they've located the boat.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 49:40 So that whole section over there is undergoing historic preservation. And National Geographic did a whole section of their book on it and so history just keeps popping up, you know? And then on that riding tour, a number of my classmates would say things like, my auntie so-and-so lived down there that street. And so, come to find out, they were descendants. Descendants of the survivors of the Clotilda. The last slave ship brought to America. Right there. Seven miles from where I grew up all that time. So, it's like, oh my god. You know? So, whenever they get the museum built in the boat, raised and refurbished and, all kind of money coming in there to build community centers and put in markers. And I've been to the grave site, you know where all those survivors are.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 50:44 And then as an aside, my brother still lives in Alabama. And I was talking about the Clotilda I was so excited when we came up. Well, he was my guest cause my husband didn't go with me. So, he was with me at all the class reunion stuff. And he said, I got somebody I want you to meet. I said, oh, really? He said, I'm gonna call him and have him over to the house tomorrow. And here comes Robert, what's Robert's last name? Great, great, great, great grandson, great, great, great, great grandson of the elder of the village that those freed slaves off the Clotilda to set up. What?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 51:32 And, I was telling them about this tour because the church, they built the, the first school for Blacks in the area. They built, those slave descendants. It was amazing. I was so moved. And then that said, Robert, and then he took, took me over to his house, and that was all his memorabilia. So, they started an association of the descendants. Oh, Kujo Kujo, what's the last name? Ah, it'll come to me. But he was the great-great-great grandson of Kujo. My brother's friend. And, it was like, oh my God. You know, and

so different classmates of mine are, you know, class of 63, they're now discovering, you know, they had ancestors. And I remember a classmate whose name was Clotilda. And, I'm so anxious to try and make contact with her to find out if her folk named her Clotilda after that boat.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 52:36

Right. That ship. But I never knew anybody named Clotilda, the only Clotilda I know, right. And so, to learn that the name of that ship was the Clotilda, and they settled there in Plateau that they later named Africa Town, seven miles from Pritchard where I grew up. But it just, history just keeps popping up in my, I don't know what to call it. So, I'll see where it leads me. But, but I know one thing I'm really committed to right now is writing my autobiography and trying to complete some of my family history and that genealogical study that I want to do, that family tree. And, you know so my descendants, will know better about themselves than I knew about myself. So I feel like I'm on a treadmill. I got to speed up. I mean, you know, so I just pray for health.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 53:37

I just pray for mental cognition and, you know, Lord, you know, give me the, give me the strength, the wherewithal. My task list is long, and my years are getting shorter. <laugh>. So, this question of, what is your past and what are your dreams? Long, big question. My past has been interesting and certainly contributory to my presents and my presents will inform my dreams. And then I have to ask myself, it's a dream. Something you're waiting on someone else to manifest, or am I to be the change I want to see?

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 54:30

So, you know, so I find myself meditating more, seeking out more quiet time, just so I can hear, you know, I'm asking the question, but if I'm so busy, <laugh>, you know, won't sit still long enough, you know, and you go ask it again. And almost like the Lord saying, I had a talk with you last week. Did you not hear me? Or, you know, so it's an interesting question. And when I sit and think, I've had a very interesting past and it's uh didn't have any meaning at the time, but I've seen more and more that it had purpose and meaning. And can relate it to different experiences, different episodes, different whatever. So that's who I am.

dindria barrow : 55:26

All right. That's who you be <laugh>.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 55:28

That's who I be <laugh>, that's who I be.

Community Archive Center Oral History Project Transcript
Dr. Thelma Jackson, Interview date: 5/11/2023

dindria barrow : Thank you so much, Thelma. I really have learned so much from you and I feel like I can learn by trying to connect to your story and then thinking about my own, reflecting on my own life. Really learned from you that you need to know where you're coming from and then you need to stay present about what's going on around you.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 55:52 Yes.

dindria barrow : 55:53 So thank you so much.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 55:55 You're so welcome. Thank you so very much for having enough interest in my life to want to archive it.

dindria barrow : 56:01 Of course.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 56:02 Let me just share with you as we close. Last week, I was honored as the historian of the year by the city of Lacey. This week the city of Olympia, awarded me a Heritage award for the book and my history work, this past Saturday, it just, just coming in waves. The Washington State Charter School Association honored me and gave me an award, the Community Rooted Leadership Award for my years of work on help helping get charter schools started in this state. I got a call my Monday, Tuesday, one of these days, the director of the Washington State Library, wanted to nominate the book for a book of the year in the non-fiction category. So, all of a sudden, you know, then I get a call from the local bookstore, Thelma, we need some more books.

Dr. Thelma Jackson : 57:04 We've sold out again. So, I take them 20 more books. And I'm also the fulfillment center. So, they go on my website and order the book. So, I've got four books there ready to go to the post office when, so it is just, you know

dindria barrow: When it rains, it pours.

Dr. Thelma Jackson: 57:23 And when it rains, it pours. And it's just great with, they have my grandkids at some of these presentations. And, to let them know, you know, this is what you're inherited, and this is what I expect you to continue on with in your own.