

Interview with Thelma Caldwell for the YWCA of Asheville 100 Years Oral History Project by Dorothy Joines on November 18, 1992

JOINES: This is November the eighteenth 1992, Dorothy Joines, talking with Thelma Caldwell. And I first heard about you from Florence Ryan who last week turned ninety-eight. And I said, who is Thelma Caldwell. And it was a great introduction for me because I made up my mind that one way or another I was going to have some time with you. And I went to the meeting where all of you were being honored. And we'll talk about that as we go on historically. But start out with you and where you began and how you became involved and what you did.

CALDWELL: Well, I was born in Rockingham, North Carolina. And that's a small town on the other side of Charlotte, North Carolina about seventy miles. And I went to school, college, Shaw University in Raleigh. And after I graduated from Shaw University I taught school in my hometown for ten years. And that's where I met my husband. He was a CCC Camp director and he was being transferred to Portland, Maine. And so it meant that I had to resign if I was going to be with him to go to Portland, Maine, so I resigned teaching and went to Portland, Maine.

And it was an experience that I, that's hard to describe because I could never, could never forget it. It was my first real contact with a white person. Our superintendent came to the schools and he, of course, distanced himself.

We went to town every afternoon. I have another friend that I just visited recently in Washington. And we laughed and talked about it every afternoon. We didn't have anything else to do. We walked about a mile to town, looked around, window shopping, bought a little stuff and then came on back.

And, after going to Portland, Maine, though, it was an experience like day and night. I'd never had any contact, as I said, with a white person on a social level. And there, oh, we were just on the dance floor and we were going places together. And someone heard about me at the YWCA and invited me up to a public affairs meeting. And I went there and fell in love with the YWCA. And I'm still in love with the YWCA. They took me in like I was a long lost friend. I'd never felt so welcomed. I just felt like I had been knowing them all my life.

So I started taking classes there. I took an art class. Didn't even know anything about art, but I just took an art class there. And I visited their various public affairs attendance. And, one day they were going to bring Joe Lewis there. And I was to bring a few friends from the USO. All of us went. And that place was really, really crowded.

They'd never seen--. They didn't know that that many blacks were in Portland, Maine, because when I went there there was only five families, five black families living there. And we worked with the sailors as they came in from the ports, my husband did. And I just worked with (unclear) just did anything to make programming.

We had all kinds of little games and activities and naming. And would start sometime with one person's name in a row and see how many could remember each person's name all the way around until you get back to the next person. And that was stuff even they hadn't gotten, you see. So that was new to them.

So, after I got so good in Portland--. I guess I was in Portland, Maine. I just felt like that I went there first as a volunteer and they kept saying you do so many little things up and out of the place so much that they suggested that I become a professional worker. And they wrote themselves, the director did, to Wilmington, Delaware. And they made me the teenage program director.

And so I had three applications from the YWCA and (unclear). I said what kind of place is this where you can get three applications to go to work. I could have gone to Philadelphia. I could have gone to New Jersey and other places in New Jersey. And then I chose Wilmington, Delaware. And that's where I went for three years as a teenage program director.

And it was the most widening experience I think I ever, I really ever had. I just don't know. It just beat teaching all together, and yet I thought teaching was great because I had the eleventh grade and then the twelfth grade. It was first eleventh grade and then extended it by a grade to the twelfth. And I just thought boy, this is something. I put my whole self into it and before I could do anything they were saying come to Dayton, Ohio. And that's where I went and spent, I think it's eleven or twelve years in Dayton, Ohio.

And I went there as a branch, what they call a branch executive. And as a branch executive director you, you work in your neighborhood which was in my particular case, it was a black community. So it was called the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. So I worked there in Dayton until, oh, I got promoted I guess I would say to associate executive director. And then I retired and came home. My husband's job gave out and came home.

And wasn't home before too long before they said they--. I got a letter wanting to know if I'd like to go to Horton, Papua, New Guinea. And I said, Papua, New Guinea, where in the world is Papua, New Guinea. And they laughed and they, we knew that was the first thing you were going to ask, where in the world is Papua, New Guinea. I said, yeah. I'm just ready to go. So, maybe it was six or eight months later that I left here and went to--. I left here on a leave of absence I would say and went to Papua, New Guinea.

And when they saw me--. I don't know what they were expecting because they had the picture. But they stood there and just looked. They didn't come to embrace me. They didn't do it. They just looked. And finally, the girl from Australia who had was, had married one of the Papua, New Guineas, she put her arms around me and then the other girls all came up and put their arms around me. What was this like?

And all the way in the car to the YWCA they talked, the, the New Guinea language, a pigeon language. And I couldn't understand what they were talking about. But they would laugh and talk and just be very excited about what they were saying. I sat back there and my stomach just going

around and around. I was wondering well, who are they talking about? Is it me? I would know if they was talking about me. So I gave it up as being meek because they finally, I could see they did accept me. And I stayed there and worked with them and—

DJ: Did they ever tell you what their reaction was?

TC: No. I don't think I ever asked them. And they were all colors. Because a little girl put her arm out beside mine one day and she said, brown, brown like me. But they varied in colors. They were almost as light as you are as far as light skinned would be because they were mixed with the Australians already, you see. So that made them a different—

DJ: But you never found out what they expected?

TC: No.

DJ: You still wonder.

TC: They accepted me. And figured it must have been all right.

DJ: And you were there for a year?

TC: Yeah. I stayed there one year. And, I didn't know how you would describe it except it was hot. And that would be, that would be the truth, hot, so hot that you could not put your hands on the table to write or anything like that unless you put a cover or a piece of paper or a towel or something under it. It was just hot. And there were two seasons, the rainy season and the hot season. And it was hot all the time, although the season that it rained it was real muggy, muggy hot.

DJ: And you had to make your own clothes?

TC: Yes. I loved to do embroidery work anyway. Needlework was one of my hobbies. So I began to take their patterns. And then be very reasonably could making my own embroidery around the yoke and the neck and down the front. I made several like that.

DJ: You couldn't wear the clothes you took with you.

TC: No. It was too hot for that. I carried mostly slacks. I had a dress or two but mostly slacks. And the dresses just didn't look like their dresses so I wanted to get in their clothes. And yet, Mr. Morie, I think that was his name, SiMorie, said that he would like for people who came from outside of his country to wear their garb so that they could see how we dressed and how people from other countries dressed rather than coming and copying immediately, you know, putting on what they had on. But that's what I did.

DJ: So it made you more acceptable.

TC: Yes. I felt that they accepted me more.

DJ: Did you learn their language?

TC: Just a few words. I could say buma-ha and like that and good morning and good night and good morning, you know, little things like that.

DJ: You said earlier that you loved teaching but there was something about Y work that was even more special. Can you tell me about that?

TC: Yes. I think it was. It was not a subject so much that I was teaching but it was teaching, working with people. And there we were in to changing

attitudes and ideas. And it seems to me that that was how you would get to really know them. You just wanted to be with them. You learned to love them instead of loving your subject. You know you weren't teaching English or teaching history, you were really just being with the people and working with them in a way that they felt--. They didn't really know they were being taught I don't think. I mean I think they just kind of accepted you and you accepted them and kind of mingled together.

DJ: You touched a lot of lives.

TC: A lot of lives, I have. And I have to look in my scrapbook sometimes to bring them all back. And then, when I do look at the scrapbook I can remember, oh, yeah, I see now what happened.

DJ: And you could see changes because of you.

TC: Yes. I could see myself changing, too. [Laughs] I learned as much from them it seems as they did from me.

DJ: You had a lot of shifts that you had gone through, a lot of shifts from going into a northern city and finding that the Y was very accepting, and then, knowing that--. With coming to Asheville, had you any experiences in Asheville before? Did you know about the city when you were--?

TC: I had a schoolmate here. And she's passed since I've been here. But I knew she was here. And that's where I stayed the first two or three nights and then after---

This house right here was being built, the Slaughter house, Mrs. Slaughter. And then I moved in with Mrs. Slaughter and I stayed for the year. And after that year I built this house with my husband, we built the house here. We bought the land from Mr. Daly and built a house here.

And so, I saw them build my house. And every morning at eight o'clock, I declare, I've never seen anything more punctual, those hammers would stop. They were on time. They worked and then when time for lunch, they'd stop and they'd start right back on time. They did not waste time. I just couldn't help but admire seeing someone look as if they were enjoying the work that they were doing.

And Mr. Robinson really enjoyed building this house. He would show it off and tell people different features about it and things that he let me add to it and things that he had brought in from, you know, a design that he had found. And we just worked together on building it. So it's really my house.

DJ: You have a beautiful location and view of the city, and a neighbor behind you that you cared about and lovely rockwork at the front.

TC: Beautiful rockwork. They took pride in doing it. That was one of the things that made me happy about it. They, they enjoyed it.

DJ: What was Asheville like when you first came? You came with the hat and glove time.

TC: Oh, yes. I, you wouldn't dare go to church without your hat and gloves. And, and it was nice, you know. I mean it makes you feel good going with

your hat and gloves because you knew Sunday was Sunday and that was one of the ways you would know.

DJ: What church did you go to?

TC: I went to--. I attended all of them. My husband hadn't come. I used to visit around several churches and finally settled at Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church. And it--. Of all the churches, one of them girls told me, of all the churches, you would go and choose that one. But that's, that's where the young lady that I, you know, replaced was speaking at the church on something. I've never really known too much about it. She spoke up and whatever she said didn't please the pastor or something. And he said something about, you told me that. And she dropped in her seat and she stayed in a stroke period for the rest of her life until she died. And so that was the period that I, that was that situation.

DJ: This was in church that it happened?

TC: It was church where the girl dropped down back into her seat from something that the minister said to her. And I never could it straightened out. But I didn't know that at the time. And so when I joined the church is when the preacher said you would go and join. I said that was the one I wanted to go to.

DJ: Well, you were called then because she was incapacitated.

TC: Yes.

DJ: And they needed--. They needed somebody.

TC: Yes. I had resigned from Portland, Maine. I was home not a whole year before they needed, they called me to come. And so I decided, well, I'll come and see. But I had made a reservation and had transported everything to go overseas with my three friends from Dayton, Ohio, two friends from Dayton, Ohio. And so they waited because that was in March and I came here in September.

DJ: And you were going to do what overseas?

TC: Oh, just visiting.

DJ: No Y work?

TC: No Y work, no, just, just going from place to place. When we got in Ireland the friend that was with us, that was her home. And so we went sightseeing all over. That was just my year. [Laughs] That's my treat to me.

DJ: And then they got you again.

TC: Yeah. I wasn't sure that that was--. I was through with the Y. I wasn't going to have to--. I wasn't even--. Any job I've ever worked on had teaching and was teenage program director. I would always leave that job with a good spirit (unclear) because you never know when you want to come back. You never know when you're going to get a reference. And, oh, I wouldn't leave otherwise so I was, I was in good spirits when I left.

DJ: Were you surprised when they called you?

TC: Yes. I thought, well, these guys, you know, I'll try it again.

DJ: Well, you really got yourself into a very difficult period.

TC: But see here there was two, there was a branch and a central. That's what we called them. The one on 23 Grove Street was called the central and the one over here on, what's the street over on, Ashland, that was called a branch. And my job, of course, having come from Portland, Maine, I knew it could work, you see. And my job was to see that they, they got together. We integrated. We went to break it down desegregation and at the same time we were getting exposure and maybe learning from each other things that we'd never learned, you see, in the classroom because you didn't have that kind of a contact.

So, when we moved here, when I came back, we were in the midst of building. They already had raised most of the money for the building. And they were going to build over here on South Richfork, the lower end. And someone found a better location. So I know that one of these pictures on January the thirteenth, I think the early morning (unclear) Mrs. Bryant was on, well that was when we had the dedication, the breaking of the ground. So I helped build this one up here because that was mine. That's where I started from the ground up when we built the YWCA. And they stayed there until I went over, till I retired and then I went overseas.

DJ: Tell me more about Asheville when you were here and the changes that you saw.

TC: Well, when I came it was just two, two separate buildings. And one night we went up there for what they call electoral. They had electors, I think they were called. There was members who could vote. And we had an

annual meeting. And I carried evidently too many. And that was a little more than Winston Hull wanted to see.

DJ: I don't understand.

TC: We carried too many blacks. This is one of the first occasions in which a lot of black people went to the central building. And see they would come for our annual meeting, be one or two. But when they had their annual meeting I just carried a batch of them. So there were too many for Mrs. Hull. She said she wasn't coming back if you were going to take over that one, too. Said we wasn't planning on taking that one, too, but we were there that night.

DJ: She was the director of the—

TC: She was the president of the YWCA. She was executive director---. I beg your pardon. She was the executive director of the YWCA.

DJ: Who were you all responsible to, headquarters, YWCA headquarters?

TC: First, it would be before we integrated and such, it was local YWCA that was responsible to the central YWCA.

DJ: So you were responsible to Mrs. Hull?

TC: She was the president. I was responsible to Mildred Parker.

DJ: Mildred Parker.

TC: Do you know that family?

DJ: I know the Parker family.

