Interview of Modeane Thompson. Interviewed by Francesca Davis and Janeese Richey of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Modeane Thompson now retired, reflects the grassroots of a strong and passionate past that has changed America. She is an example of the independent movements that took place during the Civil Rights Movement. Thompson was dedicated to teaching children morals and ethics despite their environment, displaying to them strong messages of hate, distrust, and racism. Along with four other members, Thompson founded the Memphis Panel of American Women who spoke of their personal experiences regarding their race, gender, and religion. She also wrote an article that was published in the Redbook that caught the attention of many women across America.

This interview was conducted in 2007 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

Modeane Thompson: – start.

Francesca Davis: Okay. For Mrs. Thompson, on behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project at Rhodes College, we would again like to thank you for taking time out of your very busy schedule to interview with us, so I thank you for that.

Modeane Thompson: Well, thank you for coming.

Francesca Davis: And we're gonna go ahead and begin, and so could you state your name and your current occupation for us?

Modeane Thompson: My name is Modeane Valencia Nichols Thompson, and I'm currently unemployed. I've been retired since 1992, and very recently, as of last year on July 4th, have become widowed from my husband of 54 years, Harry Thompson, and we had a very wonderful, active partnership all of those years, and I'm learning how to be a single person again.

Francesca Davis: Well, could you tell us where you were born and raised?

Modeane Thompson: In Memphis, Tennessee, Shelby County.

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I spent a good bit of my childhood in the Douglass area. We have roots there. My father and my grandmother lived in Douglass. They had businesses in Douglass, and I kn0w many, many people in the Douglass area. I went to Klondike Elementary School. I spent part of my life in Douglass and part of it in Klondike, so – and my mother and father both were Memphians, and both of them

Commented [RC1]: **Douglass** spelled with **two (ss)** is a large historic community on the North side of Memphis, Tennessee where majority of its residence are elderly individuals with birth dates as far back as the late 1800. [quoted from Wikipedia]

went to Manassas High School, graduated from Manassas High School, and so did I, so that's sort of a –

Francesca Davis: Could you talk about your parents' names, and what they did for a living?

Modeane Thompson: My mother's name was Gladys Smith Nichols, and as I said, she went to Klondike School, she went to Manassas High School, and she was basically a homemaker, a very elegant woman who loved cooking, and entertaining, and shopping. And when she married my father, whose mother owned a grocery store in the Douglass area, and they became, the two of them became business people.

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She worked with him most of her life, and he went to – he's a very bright man who was one of those who liked to know a little bit about everything, do a little bit about everything. His mother wanted him to be a doctor, and he wanted to be a saxophone player, so they never quite worked that out. He went to LeMoyne for a while. In fact, when he met my mother, when they were going to Manassas, and he was playing in the band at the time, and a little bit of history, there was a band – the bandmaster there became a very famous jazz musician, Jimmy Lunsford, and daddy was in the band, in Jimmy Lunsford's band, and he got so enamored with my mother that one day walking home from Manassas, he set his saxophone down on the corner and left it, and his momma made him go back – all the way back – because he was walking all the way to Douglass, which was a long way – and find his saxophone.

Commented [RC2]: Jimmy Lunsford was a jazz musician who ran a band in Nashville, and probably other cities.

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So the only thing that he loved better than his saxophone was my mom, and so he never became a doctor, but he became a pretty successful businessman in the Douglass area. He had several businesses, and he was very, very interested and concerned about politics. He got involved at the precinct level. He never wanted to run for office, but he supported lots of people who did, and we were pretty involved in the life of the people in the community out in the Douglass community.

Francesca Davis: Okay, and what was your father's name?

Modeane Thompson: Paul Henry Nichols.

Francesca Davis: Okay and did you have any brothers or sisters growing up?

Modeane Thompson: No.

Francesca Davis: You're the only child?

Modeane Thompson: Yes. I grew up as an only child.

Francesca Davis: Okay. What was it like for you growing up in the Douglass area, in the neighborhood? What was the community like?

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Modeane Thompson: It was a real community. It was a real neighborhood. Klondike was a – my mother's, my mother grew up in Klondike. Her parents lived in Klondike, so part of the time I spent in the Klondike area. In fact, I went to Klondike Elementary School.

The Klondike neighborhood was a quiet, close-knit neighborhood, but the Douglass neighborhood was more like a big family. Everybody knew everybody, and everybody was involved with everybody, and people in Douglass had the kind of relationship that has transcended until today. They are rebuilding Douglass Elementary School because of the interest in it. The Douglass Alumni Association still exists. A lot of people lived in Douglass, went to school in Douglass, graduated in Douglass, and they have, every year, the annual Alumni Association meeting all over the country wherever people are.

00:05:01:00 BEGIN CLIP 2

So they had one very recently in Cleveland, Ohio, and a lot of the Douglass people were there, and my daughter in law, Janet, who is married to my son, Anthony, has been recently named the principal of the new Douglass Elementary School, and people came back – they got home on Monday from Cleveland, left the airport, and came over to the Board of Education to hear the announcement, so it was that kind of community, and I still have contacts and friendships with people in the Douglass area, as well as in the Klondike School area.

Francesca Davis: That's pretty amazing. That's really amazing.

Modeane Thompson: Mm hmm, and it's interesting. My life has been a series of connections that I've made over time, because as I said, I didn't have sisters, so I just went through life finding sisters. That's how I became friends with Pamela Lois Jones. We became friends in the seventh grade, and here we existed till now she lives down the street.

Francesca Davis: What other activities were you involved in, in school?

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Modeane Thompson: Well, because my daddy loved the saxophone so much, I thought that maybe – well, he felt I could be a saxophone player, so I was in there – when they started the band in Manassas, when I was in, I think, the eighth grade, I decided I was gonna be a saxophone player too, 'cause he had his saxophone still, so I tried to learn the saxophone. I was never very good, but I – well, I tried, and then I decided I really didn't wanna be a saxophone player, so my – I think probably my favorite thing about junior high and high school was the relationships that I really began to build. I used to like to dance. We had these weekend dances all the time, and I fancied myself as being a pretty good jitterbug, but I never could sing.

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I could never sing. Talking was my forte, but – and I was never very – we had art classes that I liked, but I was never very artistic. I couldn't draw, but I did a lot of doodling a lot of the time, but actually what I liked best was reading and writing. I always loved writing.

Francesca Davis: Okay, wow. What activities were you involved in outside of school, whether it be church, or stuff like –

Modeane Thompson: Well, speaking of playing, I learned to play on the piano. My grandma wanted me to – my maternal grandmother - always thought everybody, oh they just need to know how to play the piano, so they invested piano lessons in me, and I learned how to play three songs that I could play for Sunday School as a kid. I went to Friendship Sunday School in Friendship Baptist Church on Vollintine, and I could play. There were two of us.

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We could alternate. We could play "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and "In the Garden," and I can't remember what the third one was now, but *(Laughter)* we could play those three but couldn't play anything else. So I was involved with church, and the little church programs, and that kind of things.

Francesca Davis: Okay. Did you have any role models growing up?

Modeane Thompson: I had lots of role models, but primarily my role models came from within my family. I think my mother, in terms of her grace and her elegance, I think is whom I saw as a real role model for me as how

to be a lady sort of thing, and of course she thought that I was never gonna be a lady, 'cause I was a tomboy. And my father, for his love of studying. He loved reading everything. I've showed you some of his books, and he died when he was 95 last year, and he had lived over at the St. Peter Building in his own apartment, and he had his own books, and his computer.

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He was always interested in learning stuff, and electronics, and all that kind of thing, so he was always reading, always doing something, always involved in some kind of project, and always involved with the community, so I think that's what I think.

Francesca Davis: Were you able to share with him any of the community experiences that he was interested in?

Modeane Thompson: Oh yeah. We talked about it. That's what I'm saying. That's how I learned to be able to talk about politics and that kind of thing, from him, because of his interest in things.

Francesca Davis: Okay. That's pretty amazing, and where did you go for high school?

Modeane Thompson: I went to Manassas.

Francesca Davis: Went to Manassas.

Modeane Thompson: Yeah, that's where my family, and my mother, and father had gone, and all my friends were going to Manassas, so, you know, back to the north side, south side thing, everybody ended up – because they closed Douglass High School years later, but earlier on, there was Douglass High School, and there was Manassas High School, and of course there was no choice for me.

I was gonna have to go to Manassas, but north side people went to Manassas, and south side people went to Booker T. Washington High School, so I had of friends over at Booker T. Washington.

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Francesca Davis: Okay. Did you see Memphis changing or evolving as you went through your schooling?

Modeane Thompson: I've been reflecting on some of that stuff lately. As you get older, you become more and more reflective. On my last birthday in

March, I was 78, and I did a lot of reflecting between the loss of my husband, and my dad, and just getting older in general, and I've been thinking, looking at what did I really… think? What was my formation? How did I come to be whoever this is that I am at this point, and I think for a long time, we didn't think in terms of, as you've heard people say, that we never knew we were poor.

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We were just who we were. Our family was just our family, and in terms of being any segregated society, I knew that, because we talked about the fact that there were things that we were not expected to participate in, and expected to do at the same time. My family's position was if it's there, then we should be able to avail ourselves of it, and just be prepared to avail yourselves of it at the time. Things like segregated seating and all of that, you know, thinking about it, people in my age group, we weren't – well, there was this thing about at the back of the bus. The feeling there was that, that was not right.

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It was unfair, and that it had to end, but I think it wasn't that it didn't imprint a negative sort of an impression on us in terms of our own being. It didn't make us think that we were second class citizens. I guess that's the main thing, was that we never felt like second class citizens. We felt the inequity, but we didn't feel that we were second class because of the imposition of the rules, and all of that, and always we talked about, and read about, and understood about – there used be – was it – a Black History Month I believe we used to have in schools when we talked about the few heroes that were really widely known at the time, and of course, George Washington Carver, and Booker T. Washington, and those people, but we began to learn more and more about other people who were really involved in the American life, and in building this country.

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So black folks started a long time ago looking at the contributions, and the importance of black citizens to this country, and see, at the time of the real – the last emergence of a civil rights struggle, because my dad was a big admirer of Marcus Garvey, so I already knew about Marcus Garvey, and what he had contributed, and all that kind of thing, and the idea that there had to be change.

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So by the time that the civil rights movement as you know it came along, there were a lot of people who were very much aware of the fact that there were changes, there needed to be changes, and I think the conflict that came along in the '60s between – there was an emergence of young people, college age people who were – I guess after our age group began to mature, got married, and moved along, and whatever, that they began to call a bunch of young men. Reminded me of Brandon, young, intelligent, handsome young men, well dressed, and all of that, and they called them the "New Negro." *Newsweek* – have you ever seen what I'm talking about?

Brandon Harris: Yes, ma'am.

Modeane Thompson: *Newsweek* and the other magazines started playing that idea, about the "New Negro," young folk who were intelligent, who were striving, and forward-looking, and all of that, and that began to emerge.

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At the same time, there was emerging another group of young folk who was – we've been waiting long enough, and we need to move forward kind of things. Now remember that we were older than those groups, so we were the people who provided support to the other groups. That's why we were involved with the NAACP, and why we were involved at the level of membership raising and that kind of thing, being involved in projects, and that kind of thing, so we sort of were caught in the middle. At the same time, some of us, like I was particularly – we had children at that age, and the conflict with us was, I mean, what kind of country is this that we are rearing these children, we're bringing them into? What's gonna be their future? Were really the questions that was facing those of us who either working with children, or parents of children, and that was our major concern, which is what led me to – I mentioned the article that I wrote for *Redbook*, because out of my conflict, and my concern. I mean, what is this? I've been taught.

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Of course it was put into perspective. It was reality. Like my dad says, you know that this is the white man's world, just as plainly as that, and that you have to make your own place. You have to negotiate your own space with them, and this is the way I've been taught all the time. This is what he taught me, 'cause he was often in conflict around his own feelings about that, with other people, that he was a man who demanded respect. He got respect, but it got him in trouble lots of times, and I knew that, so what he always

said to me is don't compromise your ideals, but you have to be prepared to stand up for it, and whatever it takes. And whatever it takes was pretty stringent sometimes.

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Francesca Davis: You mentioned the youth during the Civil Rights Movement were really involved, but in the college age students. Could you talk a little bit about your experiences in college, and where did you –

Modeane Thompson: Interestingly enough, that's what part of my reflection has been, exactly. We weren't concerned about the things we didn't have as much at the time. We had a pretty fairly normal childhood. We did what all the other kids you mentioned that – you went to Sunday School, you went to the youth conferences and stuff, and you did summer stuff, and didn't really think about the separation as much.

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There was no desire, "I wish I could go over there." The only thing that, it was a problem that you couldn't avail yourself of all the available resources and amenities. There was a problem around the things like the zoo. The zoo was one day a week, and our parents were taxpayers too, and the zoo is a municipal property. The zoo was on Tuesdays until the 4th of July came on Tuesday one year, and they changed the day to Thursday for black folk, and that's pretty flagrant, and that makes a pretty vivid impression on you.

You say, "What the heck is this," even as a child, as young folk, so we knew that there were a lot of inequities that had to be changed, and see, prior to – so as I said, our childhood pretty much was a normal childhood except for some things, because you love to go into school with the people whom you knew, the people who grew up in your neighborhood, people that you knew, and all of that, and riding the bus back and forth to school, the thing about getting on the back, it was getting on, and going to the back.

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Most of the time it wasn't confrontational, but sometimes it did become confrontational. If somebody said to you, "Get up and move," and people would, and then you dealt with that, but see, if you dealt with that on an event-to-event situation – but pretty much, the childhood was like any other childhood in the South.

We had a pretty happy childhood, but we looked forward in terms of going to college, for instance.

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The choices were very limited in terms of what you were gonna do, and compared to now at least, so we went to, Thelma Louis and I chose to go to LeMoyne, which was an easier – so we didn't have to trouble ourselves a lot.

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When I narrowed it down first, I thought I wanted to go to Wilberforce, 'cause I liked the way it sounded, and we kept fooling around, and finally narrowed it down, and said, "Let's go to LeMoyne," and we did, and it was a wonderful experience, because it's a small campus, and there used to be an ongoing relationship with Southwestern, where they came over to LeMoyne, and people from LeMoyne went over there, and went to the classes, and other kinds of things, so it was a very good experience, and we knew its history, and that it was a historically black college, and whatever, and it was a good fit for us at the time, but Memphis State wasn't available, and first of all, Memphis State to us didn't have as much prestige as LeMoyne did as a private, liberal arts college, and we had a pretty good liberal arts background too, and stuff.

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We were exposed to stuff that – for instance, music classes, music appreciation, where we were exposed to things like opera, and symphonies, and all of that. In fact, I saw the first opera that I'd ever seen, because of music appreciation at LeMoyne, but at the same time, I was exposed to the flagrant violations of segregation, because we had to see the – the first opera I ever saw was *Carmen*, and we had to be up in the, as we called it, the pigeon roof, all the way up at the top of the ceiling in the auditorium, but of course we were equipped with opera glasses so we could see, but that thought stayed with me a very long time.

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The stage was as far away from me as, like, the next block, but the fact – the thrill of being there and hearing the wonderful voices, and experiencing that, knowing we were experiencing an opera,

and it was that kind of balance as children, as young people, that you were able to experience things, but it was always clouded by the imposition of those unnatural kind of rules like segregation, so I know that sounds very convoluted, but that's the kind of world we lived in.

Francesca Davis: What years did you go to LeMoyne?

Modeane Thompson: I graduated in 1952. I'm aware of that right now, because it said the class of '52 is the one that did the event.

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Brandon Harris: So when did you as individuals start gaining awareness about the Civil Rights Movement?

Modeane Thompson: From the beginning. As I said, when we moved from here, when my husband was transferred to Birmingham – well, let me say this. Let me preface it with this, Brandon. The Civil Rights Movement always was, for us and my family, 'cause as I said, my father was a devotee of Marcus Garvey, and we knew that there were people for many years who tried to change. We knew that the American system was not right, and that the South and segregation was not right, and it was not something that we should have to live under, and that we needed to be working. Things were slowly changing. There was the NAACP.

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There was the Urban League, and other areas that they're working all the time, which they were always a part – that's part of the Civil Rights Movement, but as a new force, when they started things like picketing and all that, see, there was always doing the political structure in the South, and I have to talk about in Memphis particularly, because the precincts, and the neighborhoods always worked at getting this, and we started trying to elect black folk, because after Reconstruction, when they threw out all – after the Civil War, we were able to get some black folks elected, and then they got rid of all of them, and had the - retracted – regressed into the new segregation, so then people like my dad and older became folks who worked in the neighborhoods to get people elected, and that's back when we sent the first black representative for many years since reconstruction by voting together, what we used to call block vote. All sale.

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Because you know you gotta vote for this man. A.W. Willis, Alex's granddaddy, was the first person sent back – sent to Nashville as a state representative, and that was done through the precincts and all of that, and that's activism. That's real activism, so at some levels, we were always involved, but then by the time it came around to other things, and as younger folk – well, Rap Brown.

00:25:39:00 BEGIN CLIP 6

Modeane Thompson: You heard of Rap Brown?

Brandon Harris: No, I haven't.

Francesca Davis: No, ma'am.

Modeane Thompson: Oh my god.

[Laughter]

Modeane Thompson: Excuse me, camera. Rap Brown, and there were young folk particularly in - you heard of D'Army Bailey?

Francesca Davis: Yes, ma'am.

Brandon Harris: Yeah, I've heard of him.

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Modeane Thompson: He's a local judge, and he was in Berkeley at the time. You know about Berkeley – University of Berkeley, out there? Well, this is where there were a lot of activists, young guys, and that's why I'm saying, these are guys who came out of that group that was called the New Negro, very intellectual folk who understood the system, understood what it was probably gonna take to change the system, and they were in a hurry. They're young, and they wanted things to move more aggressively.

Well, Rap Brown was one that preached change, change now. They're the ones that started with the whole business about black devils and all of that. You heard of that from some other quarters, that this is wrong, and we've gotta change it by any means necessary. You ever heard of that phrase?

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Brandon Harris: Yes, ma'am.

Modeane Thompson: Okay, well that's where that came from, and by any means necessary, the Black Panthers, you ever heard of them?

Francesca Davis: Yes, ma'am.

Modeane Thompson: Rap Brown was part of them, and their thing was by any means necessary. Those of us who were going along, as I said, sort of living out our lives as conventionally as we could in a system that denied everything. The economic access wasn't the same, although we lived a good life. We did all of that forever.

We didn't have access to the same things that other people had access to, but we were just living with it, but these young folk were saying, "No, not anymore," and these were the ones who were pushing for change, and who started the movement, and they began to be called militants. That's why they called them militants, because they literally meant by any means necessary, and those of us who were older – well, actually people who were older than we were, because I never had any problem with the Panthers.

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I thought they had the right kind of slant on things, but older people probably, and I don't think my dad did either. I think he kind of admired them, but the fact that – I mean, slow down, that they were going too fast, and that we should continue to go through the courts, and we should continue to move forward very methodically in terms of changing things. See, all black folk always wanted to change the situation as it was, but there were varying ways of going about it, and these folks started that push for changing immediately, so which means at the time that my son Tony, who is my oldest son at this point, who has two college-age daughters, one just graduated, and one who's now in college.

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When he was in high school, he and my daughter, and this was in the late '60s, early '70s, they were caught in that conflict of, "What do we do?" They were in the era. You know about Afros and the era of the Afro? They found – when we were looking for pictures after my husband died, Alicia has a page that she calls, "This is the Afro page."

Everybody had some form of afro. I did. Harry did. Everybody did, but in that self identification process, trying to decide for

ourselves who we would be. The national media had dubbed these young men the new Negro, which isn't what they called themselves, but this is who they were being called, and then we were trying to make the decision whether we were gonna be black or what.

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One thing we were sure we were not gonna be anymore was – what would you guess? Negro, because the word, Negro, was – actually, it's a cultural term, and it was corrupted so many times to the n-word, as the NAACP buried it the other day, and see, that denigrated from being – 'cause it used to be very flagrant, that it was natural for people who were not people of goodwill, Caucasians to say, "nigger," very carefully – I mean, very easily, as part of their normal vocabulary, so we were in the process of who we were gonna be called, who we're gonna be, and what we're going to look like, and we're trying to determine that. It was a time of self determination for all of us, so my older children were trying to decide who they wanted to be.

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They were black, and somewhere near middle class, and Catholic, and southern. They had a lot of determinations to make, seriously, decide who they were, and there was a thing about your speech even, how you should speak, and what was important, so they had a lot of things to deal with in terms of trying to change, so all of that is a piece of the emerging Civil Rights Movement, and what they should be, whether they should – what should they do? Because there were things that – you ever heard of the Black Mondays in Memphis?

Francesca Davis: Yes, ma'am.

Modeane Thompson: Good. I'm glad you did, because that's a vital part. NAACP was very involved with Black Mondays, and people thought that was wrong.

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There was no reason why you've gotta pull children out of school, whatever, but it made its point, and it was necessary. There are certain exercises that are necessary.

Francesca Davis: In observing your environment, political and social issues that existed in our society, did they fuel your decision to submit an article to *Redbook*?

Modeane Thompson: It was out of frustration. Because that – what I'm talking about, all of the conflicts and the concern about who these children were gonna be, the fact that I had been taught – well, school taught us one thing. School taught us as black children, black students, the line that the natural democratic line – I don't mean party.

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I mean democracy, line of democracy, that everybody is equal and everybody has equal access. Well, reality taught us and intelligence taught us that is not true. It also taught us things like the policeman is your friend, and we knew that was not true, so there were certain truths that belied the standard that we were always dealing with, so we were dealing with these conflicts, and my thing was what can I truthfully tell my children, and the article I wrote in *Redbook* was exactly about that. We're telling Tony that the policeman is your friend.

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Now if you get lost, you go to the policeman, and give him your name, and your phone number, and all of that, at the same time, which would be a wonderful thing, but what's to guarantee when he does that, he's not handcuffed? So that had to do with exactly that, the fact that there are such conflicts in our society, so as a family that was already looking at it, and working inside, trying to make whatever changes we could as we went, but there was always the duality of what's supposed to be, and what is, always, and thank god that y'all emerged at a point that things are more clear, 'cause you came along at a point where you can see what's reality, and we were fed the line for so many years as children about what was – and of course for people like the pioneers, and the forerunners years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois and all those people who said, "Listen, find out what's real. Don't be deluded. Strive for what's real," but a lot of people did not have access to that kind of information.

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Brandon Harris: You talk about the duality between what you were taught and what was the reality. How did segregation as a whole affect you and your family?

Modeane Thompson: As I said, you try to live normally within it, and deal with it as situations emerge, but always aware. You were always aware, and I guess that's part of that duality that you lived. You could get on a bus, and you could decide, depending on how you feel, just like Mrs. Rosa Parks.

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One day she was just too tired to move somewhere else. It wasn't just that, because Rosa Parks was an activist, and she had decided, "This is the day I'm gonna sit where I wanna sit," but there was that always, that depending on how you felt like responding at the time – when I was a kid, we used to go – even when I was in Klondike, we could walk to Sears Crosstown – you know where that is, and it's Woodtown.

Brandon Harris: Oh, okay.

Modeane Thompson: It's that big Sears building that somebody's talking about buying finally. It's been vacant for almost 20 years, and Sears was a big department store which was in walking distance, and they had this Sears catalog – see, this is before your time – that you could order things, and go over, and pick up your order later, whatever, so you buy birthday presents, and other things, and you could get roller skates, and all kinds of things, and the neighborhood kids and I, we used to walk over to Sears and get what we wanted to get, but at the same time we'd go through the hat department, and turn all the hats around backwards, because they didn't want people to – black folk to try on the hats.

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It was *(Laughter*, and you always had to get some water out of the white fountain. There were two fountains, side by side, one that said, "White," and one that said, "Colored," so you always had to have some colored water – I mean some white water. But it's that kind of – the little bits of defiance, something that kept – your spirit was still defiant all the time. It's that you just didn't exceed to what was the law, 'cause you knew it was not right, so it was that kind of a duality.

Brandon Harris: Were there any events from the Civil Rights – specifically something that happened that sticks out in your mind, and changed the way you thought about things?

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Modeane Thompson: Interestingly enough, as I talk to you, and as I've thought about it recently, I guess my mind was never changed. I think things evolved, because as I said, my thoughts about the Black Panthers, there was lots of discussions. We had discussions up in my church about Black Panthers, and whether they were too extreme, or whatever, but we always thought that they were right on, that somebody needed to be saying what they were saying, even if we weren't saying it. Somebody needed to say it, because that's what moved things along, so I don't think so. We always felt – my grandmother, my father's mother, was a woman who dealt with the inequities in her own way, and was involved in the community, and knew it was wrong, and knew she had to do what she had to do, and speak up when she needed to, to play the game when she needed to, to achieve what she was trying to achieve.

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So I guess there's always been an awareness, that we needed to work for a change, but at the same time, I said – see, there's that duality, and it really isn't – some folks say a split personality. It really isn't. It's just an awareness of how things really are, but you must maneuver at the same time within the system that you're in.

Brandon Harris: Talk about the duality and you talked about how you moved to Birmingham with your husband and so on, but where did you work, and did that duality play into where you worked?

00:39:45:00 BEGIN CLIP 9

Modeane Thompson: Well see, at the time, because of the flow of things, 'cause Arnold was a baby, my youngest, I was home with him.

00:40:02

I was a stay at home mom at the time, and I didn't get into the community in Birmingham as much. I had my neighbors, and they were involved, and we saw everything. We saw the news every day and all of that. Now Arnold was one who as a little one, was he three? He got to be about five while he was there, and he saw all the stuff that was going on, on the news every evening.

Probably the thing that got me more disturbed than anything else was the whole Birmingham thing – was Bull Connor, and the dogs, and the water, to actually see that, and to know what was

happening, that they took high pressure fire hoses and drove women and girls up against the walls of downtown, and I think what disturbed me most about that was that I couldn't get down there, that the fact that is it right for me to be sitting, looking at this on television, when there are folks down there with their lives on the line, for that? That fight is about all of us, so that to me was the most flagrant.

00:41:11

I guess that's as close as I've ever been to watching a lynching, 'cause it was that flagrant. It was that bad. They got the dogs running to city park, and bite folks, and tear at them, folks who were trying to march, and the police had the dogs. They were steering the dogs. Some of those articles out there will show you some of that, and you'll see some of that in the other stuff, and I think that probably got me more disturbed than anything else, and now when Emmett Till was killed, that struck everybody. You know Emmett Till.

Brandon Harris: Yes, ma'am.

Modeane Thompson: It was one of the things that incensed the whole nation.

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Everybody saw that, and saw that for what the South can still do, because see, there always – as we struggled along, event by event, people were saying, "Things are getting better," and then something like that would come along to say, "No, they aren't." There's as much prejudice now and as much hatred as there ever was. Something always comes around to remind us.

It's a never ending fight. It's ongoing. It should be ongoing, which is why I think that when I was in Birmingham, that probably was the worst that I've been close to experiencing how much violence and evil there was in the system, in the segregated system.

Brandon Harris: Earlier you talked about organizations like NAACP and the Black Panthers. Were you, yourself, a part of any organizations?

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Modeane Thompson: NAACP, always, in Downey. As I said, my daddy was involved, one of the folk who did memberships for our neighborhood. The neighborhoods were big on soliciting funds for NAACP, and I always had an NAACP card, but you had it surreptitiously, because

you could be arrested for being a member of the NAACP in Birmingham.

Brandon Harris: You talked about earlier the segregation had an effect on you. Desegregation, especially in Memphis, did that have an effect on your mind and your family's also?

Modeane Thompson: Well, in terms of – yes. Yes, because desegregation was, as I said, when VECA was formed, one of its objects was to assist in the peaceful implementation of desegregation in the public schools and the elementary schools, Vollintine School, and the other schools too.

Commented [RC3]: Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association

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So that organization, we were involved with them in that, and then the neighborhood children all went. See, my children went to Catholic school, but we were having our own struggle with desegregation at the time.

Brandon Harris: You talked about your friends. Did you notice any other people as a mass for African Americans, and getting involved in the movement, especially in Memphis, since that was such a trying time.

Modeane Thompson: Yes, because what happened, see, they started formulating the various support groups and groups at the time. See, I spent five years in Birmingham, which gave the Memphis movement time to become formed, so by the time I came back, they had started all kinds of groups. They had ladies' groups and other kinds of things. They had something that before I came back to Memphis, they was pioneered here as the ladies' luncheon group. Ever heard of them?

Francesca Davis: No, ma'am.

00:44:56 BEGIN CLIP 10

Modeane Thompson: A group of women, professional women, who were black and white, who would get dressed up, and go to restaurants, go downtown, and try to desegregate the restaurants downtown, the department stores, and other places, and they had started that. See, there were all kinds of little movements that were beginning to get started, and that's what I'm saying. As you look over the whole thing in terms of civil rights movement from the time of emancipation on, you'll see little movements, little things that have participated on this emerging kind of transition of this country to

what it ought to be, so when I came back here, they had already started that stuff, and just as I got back, as I said, the first thing that struck us is that they had closed the school where the children were gonna go to school, and we were invited to a school where we weren't particularly wanted, but where we were going, because we knew we were – it was part of where we were supposed to be, so then the Panel of American Women got started, I guess, in maybe the first year when I got here.

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I got involved in it immediately, 'cause I was so glad to be back here. At least I thought the Klan wasn't looking over my shoulder. It wasn't much different. It wasn't much better. It was not really, but at least I was pretty much aware of my surroundings here, where in Birmingham, I didn't know around what corner was which Klansman in Birmingham. It was scary, but I got here, and there was several things going on, and through the organization at church, in the VECA group, I had heard about a workshop that was put on, and I used to belong to the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

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I remembered as a child they used have what was called Goodwill Month or something that we did when you talked about being friends across the races for about a week, but anyhow, I remember that from childhood, the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Well, they had sponsored a program that was called, Rearing Children of Goodwill over – Evergreen Presbyterian Church was one of the churches in this collective of churches who started Vecca, who says, "We've gotta stabilize this community and contribute to some positive value in this community," so it went over to that workshop.

It was for one week. There were women from all over the city of Memphis, from as far out as to Germantown, and the call came through the churches, and in the paper that says, "Are you interested in talking to other women who are different from you, and sharing your values, and your views," and I did that, and it was probably one of the most revealing things that had happened to me in my life at that point.

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I was in my '30s, I guess, at that point, and I met a lot of women who are friends to the day. Judy Wimmer is one of them. I met

her in the workshop. She was from Whitehaven, and we talked about our children, the what will we tell our children kind of thing, and how can we raise children of goodwill in this system, and what is it that we need to do as mothers to make this the kind of world that they can grow up in, so I said, "That's my first effort to start that," and out of that came the possibility of forming the Panel of American Women. These women, black, white, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, who would go around the Memphis community and speak to anybody who would listen to them about their views on prejudice, and how it was affecting their children, and what we all needed to do together to change that, so those were the first two organizations that I started with.

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Of course, I as I said, I was already involved. We were members of the NAACP, and the Urban League, and all those kinds of things, and always been part of that, out of church groups, and all of that.

Brandon Harris: Well, since we're on the topic of people getting involved, when you put in your article for *Redbook*, being the first African American woman to do so, what was the feedback you got back, positive and negative?

Commented [RC4]: A national magazine for working mothers.

Modeane Thompson: Well, it was pretty clear. The statement, if you'll look at the article, and you'll see on the page, it was captioned, *Two Young Mothers' Stories*, and the other young mother was a young white mother who would not put in her picture or her name. She wanted to make her statement, but in the culture, and in the climate that the country was in at the time, she was reluctant to write her name and reveal who she was, so that tells you something.

00:50:03 BEGIN CLIP 11

I got letters from all around the country from people who wrote *Redbook* saying they wanted them to forward it to me, and I met a woman who lived in, I believe it was Iowa. Her name was Yedda. Actually, I'll never forget her name. She wrote me a beautiful letter and said that she didn't know any black folk. She lived in Iowa now, and she was really interested to learn about a black family who had the same kind of values that she did, and wanted the same kind of things for their children that she did, and to know the difficulty of black families trying to achieve what she saw as natural, and said she was really, really – and we struck up a correspondence, and we corresponded for a long time. I was

thinking not long ago I wish I could find out where she is, and we corresponded over time.

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She sent me some Iowa corn, or peanuts, or something one time, and we would exchange things and all that, because we'd really strike up, and she really was interested, so she had never met anybody, intimately, any black people, and then I received other kinds of letters from folk who were saying, "Get over it," pretty much is what some people's response. The other thing is saying that it's not right, we need to change this, and other things, just be complacent, and go on. Well, that's part of the – one of the responses to segregation and discrimination is know your place, and then when you are perceived as not knowing your place, then you're out of order, which has been the concern.

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Brandon Harris: You talk about the other woman you met through your programs. You were informed. How did it really make you feel about other people getting involved?

Modeane Thompson: Well, I tell you, and the response to my being involved with these women, because I had – my friends whom I left here, because I have some of the same friends I had from – many of my friends are childhood friends, and when I came back, I went away, and I came back, and of course all of our lives had changed. We moved on some, but they were involved in different levels. Some people were actively involved in the movement, and those who were teaching were involved in the Black Mondays and all that, and Velma Louis was, and they would go into the meetings, and doing all of that. Well, I wasn't able to go to all of the meetings, and I'd go to some of them. When Martin Luther King came, I went to see him, but I wasn't actively involved in the picketing, and all of the stuff, and the Black Monday stuff, the marching, and all of that, but I was involved at some levels.

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Those who were actively involved in that. Their question was, when I got involved with the groups like the Panel of American Women and that kind of thing, "Why are you doing that? What good is that?" There was some feeling that there was misplaced commitment, that I didn't need to, because it wasn't gonna do any good. You can't change those women. My position was that I had

gotten involved with these women, and I saw some different women, than people whom I had seen before.

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As they got from me, I got a different perspective on people who had grown up in the South, white, people who went to Central High School and the other schools who didn't really know any more about what was going on with me than I knew about what was going on with them, and they hadn't had – it wasn't necessary for them to think about what the situation was, because they had the advantage, and they began to see that perhaps I do need to be doing something, and that's the group of women whom I have maintained friendship with over time, is the women who saw that yes, there was something there they could be doing, and we began to see that in the people whom we talked to, 'cause folk mostly went to church groups, and PTA groups, and that kind of thing, and when we'd come in, the four or five of us, we'd always come together.

We always drove together, and we'd come in together, and folk always looked at us in a very suspect manner. "Now what are they coming for? What do they gotta say?" and they always had the pointed questions for me, of course. "Mrs. Thompson, as a black mother," and many times, some of the things they asked were ridiculous, and we could calmly respond to them, and the other members of the group, always our process was that you never let a member of the panel be attacked, no matter what.

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So the panel steps up and defends, and many times we saw changes in some of the people who intended to be confrontational, but who changed. We think, still, today, because the panel, it ran from '70 through – oh, every once in a while we get together. Now we haven't done real panels in years, but it had an impact, along with the ladies' luncheon group, made their impact at that level, and some of them became members of the panel too as well, because they weren't speaking. They were just being visible. They were confronting the Jim Crow laws kind of thing, and I think it made a tremendous difference, I think, being with the panel, and there were some people who thought it wasn't working, and it wasn't gonna make any sense, who later admitted that apparently it did, because of its longevity.

00:56:11 BEGIN CLIP 12

Brandon Harris: Being on the panel, and being a member of other groups, was there a specific person or people who changed or affected how you thought about the Civil Rights Movements?

Modeane Thompson: Not how I thought about the Civil Rights Movement, but the possibilities for real change, and the possibilities for having some real impact, I saw many people I mentioned – our pastor, Father Leopard, who was the one who was working with the community to form VECA. I mentioned my friend Velma Louis several times, and she was one of the most involved people in many ways.

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She's past president of NAACP. She's president of MEA, and many other things, and she fought – and I didn't mention it – through our sorority that I had been involved in at a regional level on committees. We worked on a textbook committee one time years ago to take a look at the textbooks that were being used in Memphis city schools to be sure that we had the ones that reflect properly the full population of the area, and all that kind of thing, all the time, and she was – I think it was during the time she was president of NAACP. She met my pastor, Father Leopard, at – I think it was at a NAACP meeting one evening, and she said, "This man is everywhere. This little white man is just everywhere," and she said it was during a campaign.

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She said to him, "Father Leopard, do you have an NAACP card," and so he opened his coat jacket, and looked, and said, "Let me get it," and he got his wallet, and he says, "No, it hasn't expired yet," and she said that has the greatest impact on her as deciding whether or not somebody really was real and involved, and the fact that it really did take everybody to be involved, and all of us together could make the changes that we needed to do, because he, I think – I mention him often because to me, he has been a stirring role model for what the world needs to be.

Francesca Davis: Well, you said you've been reflecting recently over your involvement in that sort of thing. Could you tell us any conclusions or realizations that you've come to?

00:59:12

Modeane Thompson: I think progress is being made and that it is slow, but that we do need everybody to maintain. We need to be involved at all the

levels that we possibly can, because it has taken all levels of participation to bring us to this point.

00:59:50:00 BEGIN CLIP 13

It's taken everything. It's taken the Black Panthers. It's taken the Urban League. It's taken the NAACP. It's taken the Black Students' Associations.

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It's taken the Greek letter organizations. It's taken churches and it's taken white people to be involved with us along this path, 'cause this isn't our fight alone, but it is a fight, and it's a continuing fight, and the disturbing thing is the number of young people who are not getting involved at this point, 'cause for a while, there was that time – I'm so glad to see young folk involved again with NAACP, because for a while, there was this tendency. After we went from the new Negro, and the Black Panthers, and the militant organizations, we moved into – as young folk were beginning to move into the boomer age, where folks were getting any kind of jobs that they wanted, they were graduating from all of the big schools, and they were getting advanced degrees, and they were moving into corporate America, that we began to hear from some of our young black folk that, "I got where I'm going.

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NAACP and all of that, that didn't affect me. That didn't get me where I am today. I pulled myself up through my own intelligence from all of that." Well, that's fallacious thinking, 'cause the ground had been laid by all of those that had gone on before them, and they need to realize that we need them to be in there, contributing back, because they didn't really get – say, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps really doesn't work.

It works with somebody else helping along, so I'd like to see more and more young people involved, and continuing the fight, and hearing what people like Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois said, it's as good today as it was then. Because the whole idea of fighting for liberty, and freedom, and economic advancement is just as good today as it ever was, and none of us got there by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, so it's necessary to stay involved at every level.

00:62:32

Francesca Davis: So with all of your accolades, and your awards, and that sort of thing that you've accomplished in your life, what would you say is your greatest achievement, your greatest accomplishment?

Modeane Thompson: Actually, I don't think in terms of accomplishment.

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I think my greatest accomplishment has been to be able to be in touch with people who are important in terms of their being active, and involved, and interested, and interesting people, and to be in touch with them, and to have the kind of friends that you can call and say, "Let's get involved in this," and they will. I think that to me is an asset. That's, to me, is a joy.

That to me is a luxury. Now some of the things, the little old things of accomplishments, this is one of my prizes, because this is something that I never anticipated, and as they'll tell you, that I resisted it for the longest time, but it's one of the most gorgeous kinds of– I've got lots of plaques and things. They're all in a thing.

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They're packed all together somewhere, because those are things I see as incentives to move on and do something else, and to me, they are a certificate of achievement. Somebody says, "Thank you for having put in 15 hours of doing so-and-so," which says to me, "Okay, let's go do something else," but this I think is really special, because this is more than I would've ever anticipated for what I've done, 'cause what I've done is just part of me and my life, and the way I intended to live my life as a Christian, doing what I think I should do, and in the best way that I possibly can, but this really is one of my prized possessions.

I just love it, 'cause it's so beautiful, it really is, and to have my name on that, I'm just sorry that my mom couldn't see that with my name, and my daddy either, 'cause he was not able to be there, but I think just being involved with people like your professor, who thinks that I do something well, and it's always very funny to me, because I don't think a lot about it.

00:65:15

[End of Audio]