

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thelma Lee Russell

PERSON

Russell, Thelma Lee, 1931-2016

Alternative Names: Thelma Lee Russell; Thelma Lee Cox

Life Dates: July 15, 1931-December 11, 2016

Place of Birth: Charleston, Missouri, USA

Residence: Fort Wayne, IN

Work: Muskego, WI

Occupations: Education Entrepreneur

Biographical Note

Early childhood education advocate Thelma Russell was born Thelma Lee Cox in Charleston, Missouri, on July 15, 1931. Russell's parents, Gerline Fulks Cox and Ernest Cox, migrated to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where Russell attended Harmar Elementary School. An award winning school artist and youth church leader, Russell wanted to be a teacher; however, when she graduated from Central High School in 1950, she immediately married Robert Russell, Jr., with whom she started raising a family. A serviceman's wife, Russell lived in Baumholder, Germany, from 1957 to 1958; when she returned to Fort Wayne, she attended St. Francis College (now St. Francis University) where she studied early childhood education and business.

From 1962 to 1970, Russell, then an office assistant and teacher's aide at James Smart School, noticed that children were missing school to take care of their preschool-aged siblings. Feeling inspired by God, Russell decided to start a preschool program in a large apartment building she owned; brushing aside various forms of community racism, the building was remodeled to adhere to state and local standards and regulations. In 1970, Russell quit her job and opened The Gingerbread House, the first black owned educational and developmental child-care center in Fort Wayne. Starting with one child, the enrollment grew to fifty-five children in the first three weeks, and eventually grew to one hundred and twenty-eight. With an integrated staff, Russell emphasized school readiness in reading and math with two hot meals a day and regular field trips. Russell soon offered after school tutoring and a learn to read program for children six to ten years old. With the addition of a large multi purpose room, The Gingerbread House became a center for African American art and history, celebrating the lives of great black heroes and inventors. In 1990, The Gingerbread House's 20th

Anniversary Celebration featured actors and activists Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, who read to the children and conducted workshops for the parents. In 1995, one hundred Gingerbread House alumni gathered to celebrate the institution.

Russell, who retired as executive director of The Gingerbread House in 1999, also served on the board of directors of the Urban League, the Fort Wayne Club, and the Fort Wayne Museum of Art. The NAACP, Kappa Alpha Psi, Y.W.C.A., Links Inc., Times Corner Kiwanis Club, Zeta Phi Beta, Fort Wayne Club, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Unity Day Committee have honored Russell. Russell received the Hoosier of the Year Award and the Mayor's Twenty-Five Years of Excellence Award from the City of Fort Wayne. In addition to her professional activities, Russell raised six children.

Russell passed away on December 11, 2016 at age 85.

Related Entries

Central High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Harmar Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Saint Francis [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Bachelor of Arts

James H. Smart School [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1958 to ?]

Secretary/Teachers Assistant

Gingerbread House Inc. [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1970 to 1999]

Owner