

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thelma Lee Russell

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Russell, Thelma Lee, 1931-2016 |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, |
| Dates: | May 24, 2005 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2005 |
| Physical Description: | 5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:26:50). |
| Abstract: | Education entrepreneur Thelma Lee Russell (1931 - 2016) founded The Gingerbread House, the first black owned educational and developmental child-care center in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Russell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 24, 2005, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2005_123 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thelma Lee Russell was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 24, 2005, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Education entrepreneur Thelma Lee Russell (1931 - 2016) founded The Gingerbread House, the first black owned educational and developmental child-care center in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Russell, Thelma Lee, 1931-2016

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Russell, Thelma Lee, 1931-2016--Interviews

Youth workers--Interviews

African American women educators--Interviews

African American women teachers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Education Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, May 24, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, Section A2005_123_001_001, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Thelma Lee Russell was born July 15, 1931 in Charleston, Missouri. Russell's mother, Gerline Fulks Cox, was a teacher in Charleston while her sisters worked for different white families. She was killed when Russell was three years old. Her father, Ernest Cox, Sr., was born in Caruthersville, Missouri. Russell remembers her family talking about local lynchings when she was a child. Around 1937, Russell and her father left Charleston so he could work at one of the factories in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Her brothers, Willis and Ernest Cox, Jr., were each raised in different towns by aunts. As a child, Russell shared a home with several other African American families who had moved from the South as part of the Great Migration. Eventually her family moved into their own house. Her father, a deacon at their church, worked for a coal company and as a janitor for the city. Russell attended Harmar Elementary School. As she grew up, she spent more time in the African American neighborhood of Fort Wayne called The Avenue.

Youth workers--Interviews.

African American women educators--Interviews.

African American women teachers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, Section A2005_123_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Thelma Lee Russell grew up in Fort Wayne with her father, stepmother and step-nephew. With her stepmother overlooking her at home, Russell was drawn to her encouraging teachers. At Harmar Elementary School, her paintings won several Alliance for Young Artists & Writers Gold Keys. At church and school, Russell took on leadership positions. She was a camp volunteer and a leader in her church's youth groups. At Central High School, she was involved in the art and science clubs and the Girls Athletic Association. Soon after graduating in 1950, she married Robert Russell, Jr. Russell. Russell and her son moved with her husband to Baumholder, Germany for his U.S. military service. In 1958, they returned to Fort Wayne. Russell pursued her bachelor's degree in elementary education at St. Francis College while working as a secretary at James H. Smart School. Realizing that students were missing school to watch their siblings while their parents worked, she developed the idea for the Gingerbread House.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, Section A2005_123_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Thelma Lee Russell and her husband owned one of the few apartment buildings for African Americans in Fort Wayne, Indiana. While collecting rent one day, she realized the building could serve as the site for an early childhood care center. The next day she gave the tenants notice, quit her job at James H. Smart School, and began remodeling to create this center. The Gingerbread House opened September of 1970 and was at participant capacity within two weeks. The goal of the organization was to prepare children ages three to five for first grade; the children learned their alphabet and numbers, how to write and how to attend school. An important part of the program was to incorporate affirmations

and positive thinking. To create productive members of society, Russell had children memorize William Holmes Borders, Sr.'s poem 'I Am Somebody' every year, learn about African American leaders, and take field trips in the surrounding communities. Russell describes her approach to teaching and management of the center.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, Section A2005_123_001_004, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Thelma Lee Russell obtained government subsidies, created a graduation ceremony, and kept parents involved while running The Gingerbread House for thirty years. In 1987, the center was robbed. Police caught the thieves and returned the stolen items, but charges were never filed, despite Russell's public outrage. For The Gingerbread House's twentieth anniversary, Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne hosted a ceremony. Guest speakers HistoryMakers Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee held workshops with the children and parents and watched the children sing a song in Spanish and perform a soul train about black inventors. After Russell's retirement in 2000, The Gingerbread House began to decline until Union Baptist Church in Fort Wayne took over managing the center. Russell reflects upon her life. She describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, generational differences in parenting styles, her children's education and careers and her father witnessing her launch The Gingerbread House.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Lee Russell, Section A2005_123_001_005, TRT: 0:26:20 ?

Thelma Lee Russell's legacy is The Gingerbread House. Through her childcare center, she provided a strong educational foundation for the children, many of whom attended college and had successful careers. She is proud when she sees graduates at The Gingerbread House reunions and knows that she helped them. Russell wants to be remembered as someone who tried to help people. To conclude the interview, Russell narrates her photos.