

June Manning Thomas Oral History

Interviewee: June Manning Thomas

Interviewer: Dr. Jeffrey Makala

Date: October 25, 2018

Dr. Makala: OK, hello, this is Jeffrey Makala. And I am here with June Manning Thomas. We are in the Pitts room of Duke library on the Furman campus, and it's October 25th, 2018. Thank you for joining us, June.

Ms. Thomas: No, of course.

Dr. Makala: Thank you for being here. We appreciate your time. So can we start, please, by-- can you tell me about where and when you grew up?

Ms. Thomas: So most of my childhood, I was in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Probably for about four years, from '52 to '56, I was actually in Charleston. My father had a congregation in Charleston during that time, and then he was chosen president of Claflin College. And so for that reason, we moved back to-- we moved back to Orangeburg. I was born in Orangeburg.

Dr. Makala: And where did you go to high school?

Ms. Thomas: My first year, I went to the all-black Wilkinson High School. And my last three years, I went to-- I integrated under court order-- Orangeburg High School, which was white when I first went there.

Dr. Makala: Why was your high school background significant? This was your question.

Ms. Thomas: So first of all, there was no way I would have come to Furman if not for that high school experience. It kind of shaped my life but certainly my young life. The years of my youth were shaped by that experience because, essentially, it was a fairly traumatic experience. We did go under court ordered to a resistant high school. And so I spent three years, essentially, being a first. And it prepared me academically so it led to a lot of academic honors, national academic honors, but I had to seek refuge, emotionally, from the trauma of high school.

Dr. Makala: How many students integrated?

Ms. Thomas: There were 13 of about-- 13 of us. I was trying to remember exactly. But there were only three of us in my grade, 10th grade, for that first year.

Dr. Makala: And you spent a summer program on the Furman Campus at some point during high school. Could you tell us about that?

Ms. Thomas: So that was the significance of the high school actually, because when I came to Furman, that was the first time I felt a friendship with white students because the high school experience was one of ostracism and harassment. And so it was very impressive to come to that summer program and feel the opposite. So this was a summer program-- I've actually found reference to it in the Furman alumni magazine, but it was probably the second year of a program-- I think it was called, Summer Program for Gifted High School Juniors or something like that.

And Dr. Crabtree was a director. And I think there were-- I don't know-- 15 or 20 of us who came from around the state. We'd all been selected because of grade point average. Someone in my high school must have recommended me, but I was the only black student. So I think I might have been the first black woman to come here because the impression, when I came, was that there was no one here but Joe Vaughn. But I didn't have any interaction with him because I was here during the summer. I met him later.

But it was-- actually, my memories of that six weeks are stronger than my memories of my freshman year because it was there that I chose and had friendships that seemed genuine with white students. And it was because of the affirmation of that summer program that I decided to come to Furman as a freshman.

Dr. Makala: Was it coeducational?

Ms. Thomas: Yes, there were guys in the class, but I don't remember any of them.

Dr. Makala: And you all lived in the dorms for that--

Ms. Thomas: Yeah, we lived in the dorms. I was looking in the yearbook to see if I could remember the faces because the ones that came would have been in the freshman class. And the only one I could remember very well was my best friend, a young woman named Mary Beth Hare. And I see she's in the freshman class but I had some other white friends, too, besides her, but their names have escaped me, so I don't remember who those were.

Dr. Makala: And did your family encourage you to apply to Furman after that?

Ms. Thomas: I think the summer program had made a positive impression on my whole family. Obviously, they brought me up here. They had, essentially, some reservations because they had seen how difficult high school was. They had actually tried to get me to transfer from high school to a private boarding school, they found for

black children, that I refused to go to. And I refused because there was no one else, I felt, in that little cadre of black students, that was integrating the high school that could afford to go to a boarding school.

Though, there were a couple that actually did leave.

So this was a bit of a leap of faith to come from that situation, a hostile environment, to go to yet another white school, as a first, was-- It took a little bit of faith, I think on the part of my whole family. But my father seemed to be impressed. I was just remembering. For some reason, my father was impressed with Dr. Blackwell. I remember it distinctly as saying, Dr. Blackwell's a good man and no more detail than that. I have no memory, of course, that would have been after-- so he would have come '65 or something?

Dr. Makala: Yes.

Ms. Thomas: So somehow my father must have found out something about Blackwell. So we had a high opinion of Blackwell, and a high opinion of school because, finally, people that treated me like a human being here, during that summer. And it was clear I was not going to go to the schools, they may have thought, they wanted me to go to. I think middle class black girls went to Spelman, if not to Claflin, or state.

And I'd actually been accepted at Vassar, which has now merged into Harvard, for early admission, so I'd been accepted. The same summer I came to Furman, I turned down an offer to go to Vassar. So they were a little befuddled. What did I want? And as it turned out, I didn't really know what I wanted. But they went along with it. Furman, it seemed a safe place to come, and it was relatively close to home compared to the other options. I thought I wanted to stay close to my sister because I had a sister who was nine years younger. So I thought I didn't want to go too far from her. So I actually came here-- I think I was offered a full-tuition scholarship, which I took. And that's why I came here, but I came at the same time as some of these friends from the summer program. So I came in knowing some of the freshmen already.

Dr. Makala: Did your experience in the summer program serve as a feeder for Furman wanting you to be here? Was there a soft recruitment?

Ms. Thomas: Oh, it was pretty hard. It was--
[LAUGHTER]

No, I distinctly remember, once I saw his picture, I had to go back and look at some of the things online. But once I saw Dr. Crabtree's picture, I vividly remembered sitting in his office and his telling me why I should come to Furman. And this would have been sometime during the summer program. He would

have sat me down, and he probably did that with everybody because, evidently, he was in charge of recruitment. I found that out later. But he sat me down in his office and explained to me all the reasons I should come to Furman. And I don't remember what the reasons were. I just remember his earnest face telling me this would be a wonderful place for me. And so I came.

Dr. Makala: So when you-- how was your-- what was your first impression of your academic experience when you got here on campus?

Ms. Thomas: For the summer program or the—

Dr. Makala: When you got here as a freshman, a first year student.

Ms. Thomas: Well, I was well prepared for Furman because I'd gone to an extraordinary school on South Carolina State College's campus, which was called a laboratory school in those days, Felton, which had extreme academic rigor. So it was a very good program. And then, for all the harassment I suffered in high school, it was a very strong program, much stronger than my ninth grade which was in the black public high school. So I was academically prepared for Furman, and I'd had such great English teachers in that white high school that I knew probably a lot more than most people did about-- in those days, you diagrammed sentences. And you had 10 vocabulary words every week. Every Friday, I had to take a test on 10 new vocabulary words in high school.

So when I got to Furman, the English, which was fairly rigorous, was challenging but doable, but I do remember, there was a class that you could take to see if you had to take a basic English composition class. And it was a test to see if you really knew your stuff. So I just knew coming in that I knew my stuff for English Composition and writing. So I said, oh, man, this is going to be easy. So I took the test. It was a writing test, and to my great shock, I did not pass. And that was so amazing to me because my English teachers used to rave about my essays, and I just thought I knew it all.

So I think I got out about midterm. So I got out of whatever that basic level freshman English was, but I was annoyed that it took me several weeks to get out of that. So that was very interesting. I only remember a few classes. I remember a swimming class. And in those days, swimming was required class, and that was my only F in life. And the only reason, I was very nonphysical. I was a bookworm and, certainly, did not know how to swim. And they were trying to teach me some basic swimming skills.

And there was one day, about midterm, that the Phys Ed teacher asked me to swim to the end of the pool, which I should have been able to do. And I got about halfway, and I think it was anxiety, but I just realized I was about to drown.

So I pulled over to the side, and she screamed at me. And she said, you have to make it to the end of the pool, and I said, I can't. She said, you have to. I said, I can't. And at that moment I figured, it's better to flunk swimming than to die, so I pulled myself out of the pool, and I walked out. And I said to myself that I would just take it and make it up. I'd take it another year or something because I knew I had to pass that class test to graduate.

But I just honestly could not see myself making it to the end of that pool. I think there was a bit of anxiety there because I totally lost breath. So that was very hard. Swimming was very hard. And I remember I took Latin. Latin was very good. That was maybe my second or third year of Latin. I think was my third year. So I always enjoyed that so that was enjoyable. And then I have many, many memories of religion class, many memories. I do wish I could remember the teacher's names but those were phenomenal, wonderful classes.

Dr. Makala: Did you know what subjects you were most interested in and what you thought you would study?

Ms. Thomas: I thought I would study math and physics, but I couldn't because there was too much going on, in terms of the student movement and the civil rights movement. And so it soon became obvious that I couldn't keep my mind on math and physics. But I think if I were transposed 20 years ahead or 20 years back, if not for the civil rights movement, I would have been an either a math or physics.

Dr. Makala: What sort of friendships did you make? Or how did you make friendships and get into dorm life and all those sorts of things?

Ms. Thomas: So I came in with friends. Those were the friends from the summer program. But I don't remember hanging out with those friends so much because I was put in the dorm room with Lillian and Sarah. So we were in a triple. And so, naturally, I spent most of my time with them. And then Joe Vaughn, and Tyrone, and a few of the other black students, as well.

Dr. Makala: Was the dorm a choice, or was that what Furman told you you would be rooming-- who you would be rooming with?

Ms. Thomas: I think it was set up that way. We were the first three black women. And I don't remember the details, but I do remember that we had two suite mates who seemed very nice. And they gave me the impression that they were given a choice. And that they were chosen in part because they could be mature helpers. So they were either juniors or seniors, these women, and they were very friendly. So the five of us shared the same bathroom, but this seemed quite purposeful. I have no evidence for that.

But if they had asked me to choose, I would have asked for one of the summer kids, Mary Beth Hare, or somebody, but they didn't. So that makes me think they didn't ask then we were just set up that way. But, for sure, those two suites mates seemed to have been placed there on purpose.

And then, as I think I explained to you earlier, there seemed to be a gravitation among the black students that were there. So there were a couple of other undergrads who were there. I actually wrote their names down. I left a sheet of paper in the other room. But certainly Joe Vaughn and Tyrone. Tyrone was my closest friend. He was a sophomore. And he and I studied together in the library. I had less in common with Lillian and Sarah but we were friends nonetheless. And then there was this place and the student center where we tended to play Scrabble and just socialize a lot.

Dr. Makala: So in the fall of '67, when you were there, you helped found the Furman chapter of the SSOC, the southern students organizing committee. Can you tell me how that came about?

Ms. Thomas: I cannot. I think-- so if Joe was involved, he would have asked me. That's the way it would have happened. It wouldn't have happened by my taking the initiative because I was a freshman, and I was very conscious of-- even though I knew Furman and had been here-- it was new still. And I was on the low rung. So I think it's significant that there were only two blacks that show up on that founding picture, Joe and myself. And I'm pretty sure that suggests to me that Joe recruited, and that I spoke up and said, yes, which wouldn't have been surprising because I'd been-- I considered myself to be in the civil rights movement.

And so it would have been a natural for me to join a campus group that said it was in support of the civil rights movement. And it probably was the only one that was that would have said that. And so how I came to be selected as Secretary, I have no idea. I have listened to some of the oral history. I listened to John Duggan's oral history. He talks about me as well as Joe. And quite frankly, he remembers more than I do.

[LAUGHTER]

So I think-- and I've actually had some of that SSOC-- I've had two or three of them, have written me over the years so I must have made some impression on them. And so I did become a part of it. And I was happy to find someone of like mind here on campus.

And so that would have been the situation under which I joined SSOC. But I wasn't a ringleader. I wasn't an intellectual leader of it. I wasn't somebody who founded or started programs with SSOC. I was hanging out with Joe and his buddies and some people that were like-minded.

Dr. Makala: Jack Sullivan, the president, spent the summer of '67 in Chicago, studying different organizations, and networking, and becoming apparently more committed to the civil rights work. He came back and he published a six-part series [? on the palette ?] in that fall, which basically laid out the organizational structure, and the theory, and ways in which the movement was doing work. Do you remember when that was being published?

Ms. Thomas: No, but here is the thing. It wouldn't have been impressive to me because I grew up in Orangeburg which was a hotbed of the civil rights movement. So I didn't actually read that series until a few weeks ago. I went back, when I remembered who Jack was. I went back and read the series. And I read it, I mean, I read all those pieces. And it would have been like-- it would have been ordinary stuff to me, the things that he said, that maybe were quite revolutionary for Furman, would have been not surprising and maybe even a little tame for me. So I can't imagine I didn't see them but they wouldn't-- I don't think they would have made a great impression on me. I don't mean that in a negative way. It's just that they would not have been a great revelation to me.

But I'll tell you what they did probably do is they made him a more comfortable person for me. So here was a person who obviously knew the vocabulary and the lingo that I was familiar with because I'd been hanging out with civil rights people in Orangeburg. So just a few weeks ago, when I read his series, I said, oh, yeah, well, if he knew about us, yes. And if he knew about Vietnam War, we would have had easily conversations in which he would have seemed to have been just like my other friends. So I think that particular series might have been a big event here at Furman and to me it would have been, oh, yeah, well, he's an OK guy.

Dr. Makala: Do you remember any reaction from other Furman students to all this movement, to the founding of the SSOC, and more talk of civil rights and Vietnam at that period?

Ms. Thomas: So even though I had this little group of summer friends. I lost track of what they were thinking. So part of the black experience at Furman in those days was you were in a friendly place but with people who had their own social lives and who came here from their own hometowns, probably with their fellow classmates who formed their own social groups. So I didn't feel that I was in facile conversation with a lot of the white students here except for the SSOC crowd.

And I was in much more facile conversation with the black students. And reality was a lot different for the black students than it was for the white students.

Dr. Makala: Could you say more about that?

Ms. Thomas: Yeah, so I think there was a huddling phenomenon where we sought each other out for comfort and for friendship. So it wasn't like high school. There was no active harassment, but we were aware that we were in a predominantly conservative environment. And maybe there was just a bit of unfamiliarity among the white students with having any black-- so if you think about it, this was '67, '68. And for that period from '64 to '70, there was a gradual desegregation of high schools in South Carolina that was very uneven.

So what that meant was, if you talk about just the South Carolina undergraduates that came here, some of them would have been school with black students, and some of them would not have been. So some of them would have been in school with black students like my high school where there was an unspoken agreement among the white students not to speak to us and not to touch us. So it was ostracism in the purest sense of the word. And so, just think, some of those students probably came here.

Then there were other students who were like my friend, who was from-- I think she was from a little town, it was Saluda, or Fountain Inn, or something like that, one of my summer school students. And she came here as well. And so she grew up in an all-white high school but there wasn't this court-ordered desegregation. A small town like that, the relationships between black and white would have been more casual and more informal. There wasn't the hostility. I sensed in her a willingness to see you as a human being so that's the other extreme.

And then, of course, you had people who from big cities white students from the north, white students from Atlanta. So they would've been different but-- we would have had to have done a survey of that class to see how many of them had ever been in school with black students before and had made friends with them. So therefore, we were dealing with a student body that was unfamiliar with blacks in their presence, in a social sense. And even those that were friendly, and were not hostile, and not downright oppressive were still not necessarily comfortable.

So that I think helped to lead to the huddling behavior that I described because you knew with the other black students that at least they understood. So you tended and-- plus they put me in a room, a dorm room with two black students. And so you tended to hang out with them. You hung out with-- except for Joe. Joe was a phenomenon unto himself. But everybody else was just a little careful,

maybe just a little reluctant to open ourselves up too much. And kind of watching to see how things were going to be with Furman.

Dr. Makala: Did you spend time together off campus in Greenville?

Ms. Thomas: I don't remember spending time-- I remember going off campus. There was a young man from State, South Carolina State College. I remember going into Greenville with him for some kind of pool table, some kind of pool hall, my first and only time in a pool hall my life. I had met a member of the Bahá'í faith, a black guy who went to South Carolina State College. And he took me to a couple of Bahá'í events in Greenville which would have been a religious community. And they were interracial. They were always interracial, but I always went by myself. My friends didn't go with me.

Sarah did take me to her house when we were freshmen. I can't remember why, but I did go to wherever she was from. And that was quite an experience because she came from very humble, very humble background. And I have vivid memories of that trip. It was a very humbling trip. But that was about it.

Dr. Makala: Did Sarah's musical background in performance cause her to have an easier time, would you say?

Ms. Thomas: I don't know that, well, Sarah was sort of like a star basketball player in a school who received so many confirmations from her talent that it probably was easier. But then, as I said, she also came from a very humble background. So she may have been a little uncomfortable from that. So it's a mixed bag. Sarah's voice was beautiful. I don't know if you heard her voice, a beautiful voice, operatic voice. As a freshman, she had an operatic voice.

And I actually could play enough piano to accompany her, so we spent many hours together. And one of the music buildings, small practice rooms, and I'd be pounding out something on the piano, and she'd be singing. And I can't even describe what that was like. If you can imagine being in a room the size of a closet with Marian Anderson. That's what it was like. I mean, she was like a diva. And I was so proud of her. And, of course, when we sang-- I was on the choir and she sang in the choir-- and, of course, she got solo parts. And, of course, I did not. I couldn't even play piano well enough to accompany.

So there was that great adulation of her and her voice, but she wasn't as ready, I think, as I was because I'd had the schooling. I grew up in the president's house at Claflin, so I'd been raised on Emily Post etiquette. And I was a National Merit finalist, so I was ready academically. And so, I don't know, you can ask her what she felt about that.

Dr. Makala: In the spring of 1968 in February, in Orangeburg, three college students were killed at SC State, what we call now the Orangeburg massacre, in your hometown. So could you tell us about hearing about that and what happened here at Furman afterward?

Ms. Thomas: Yeah, so I actually don't remember the moment I heard about it. I do remember the moment I heard, two months later, when King was killed and I can tell you more about that later. But I don't remember that moment. I just remember shock. And fury. And intense grief. The young man who took me to that pool hall was wounded. So I visited him in the hospital. And I remember that very well. I remember going to the hospital. It's so funny because I went on two dates with him, so I don't even remember his name. But I remember he was shot in the massacre. And I think he was from Greenville, so I went to see him in the hospital.

And intense grief. State-- so you have to understand I grew up on Claflin's campus, as I've mentioned. And there's only a fence between Claflin and State. It's a chain-link fence. I mean, you just walk from one to the other. And so I had walked on State College's campus every day of my life that I was in school, from second grade to eighth grade, because I went to school at the laboratory. So it was personal.

So I don't remember whose idea was to have the march, but I've read accounts that it was Joe, myself, and Tyrone which sounds perfectly right, but I'll tell you how it would have happened. It would have been Joe who instigated that, and I would have a second in line, and Ty would have been right along with me, or he would have been third in line. And it would have been very comfortable for us because we grew up with marches and signs. We grew up marching. We grew up boycotting.

So it would have been perfectly natural, it actually could have been my idea. It could have easily because that was the way we did things in Orangeburg. I mean, stuff happened and you grabbed some paper, and you made a poster, and you marched. So all I remember is I remember being in the March, and several of the white students joined us they were SSOC students who joined us. And I just remember being in the March, walking around a circle with these signs.

And, of course, this was in front of the federal building. Of course, it meant nothing but later some of the white students said that there were people that passed, and honked at us, and yelled nigger lover at the white students. I have no memory of that, but it would have been unremarkable to me because that's the way high school was. You got harassed so it wouldn't have been a big deal. It might have been a big deal to the SSOC white students who probably had never been in a picket line before. They were not picket line people. So that would

have been remarkable, but, to me, it would have been like, oh, this is just another day like Orangeburg. So I wouldn't have.

So I remember that. And then I remember my parents finding out. So someone drove by and saw me in the line and told my parents, and that was not a pretty picture.

Dr. Makala: What did they say?

Ms. Thomas: They would have asked. They asked something. I don't remember exactly what they said but they wanted to know why I did that, what was I doing doing that. It was really-- everybody was scared. I mean people had gotten shot. For all we knew, we could have gotten shot at when those cars are driving by.

Dr. Makala: The tenor on campus change at all after that? Or did SSOC change after that experience?

Ms. Thomas: I don't know. I was so out of it. At some point, I resigned as secretary. I forgot that until I saw it in Duggan's oral history. He said, well, June resigned. She wrote a letter. And I heard him say that two weeks ago. I heard him say that, and I said, oh, yeah, I did resign. I'd forgotten about that. And then he said something that really felt very, very-- I was very sad to hear him say, she wrote a letter to Jack, and Jack carried that letter around for 20 years.

And I said to myself, oh, my God, I hope I was not mean.

[LAUGHTER]

I hope I was-- I didn't hurt their feelings because they were-- SSOC was very well-meaning but they were far from being radical. I know they were considered to be radical--

[LAUGHTER]

--for Furman, and I know that the series was considered to be radical. But coming from my background, they were very, very tame. So I don't remember the letter, but I know what I would have written.

I would have said-- I think Duggan said I said something-- he wasn't sure-- maybe Jack still has the letter. Evidently, he carried it around for some time, so I don't know exactly what I would've said. But there was so much going on. There was so much going on with civil rights and with the black student movement. I probably would have felt SSOC was too tame and was moving too slow. The issues were not my issues. The issues SSOC chose-- I can understand why the

organization chose those issues, but they weren't my issues. Like chapel and basically-- what was the other issue? The speaker ban. So that I might have gotten some enthusiasm about that one. But the chapel ban and the ROTC, that would not have interested me very much.

I didn't mind going to chapel. I was used to going to church all the time. We lived a block from the church, so I was in church every Sunday. So chapel twice a week wouldn't have been a big deal to me. I probably even liked it a little bit.

[LAUGHTER]

So for SSOC to choose that as an issue, I just couldn't get excited about that. And I was trying to form friendships and bonds with some of the black students and trying to understand something about my own feelings about black revolutionary thought and student radicalism.

So in hindsight, that's probably what motivated me but I have no memory. It was not a pivotal point. It's only when I heard this other student's narrative that I realized that this was, what to me would have probably been just a moment of pique, throwing a letter at them or something. I was probably tired of being secretary.

[LAUGHTER]

[INAUDIBLE] looking for excuses. But whatever it was what did not register as a big deal to me what-- what registers to me from that spring are two things. The Orangeburg massacre and our attempt to essentially have a march. That registers very strongly and the death of Martin Luther King and our trip to Atlanta. That registers very strongly.

And, of course, continuing with my classes. So the spring would have been my New Testament class. The fall was the required-- Do they still do that?

Dr. Makala: A sequence in religion?

Ms. Thomas: You had to take Old Testament, fall semester, and New Testament, spring.

Dr. Makala: I'm not sure. I wouldn't expect it anymore.

Ms. Thomas: No, we had required religion classes which, I thought, were the best classes. I gotta tell you. Those were the best classes. You gotta ask me to talk about those. Those were really good. But those were the two events that really struck me. And the King event was particularly interesting because, first of all, I was in that room where the three girls stayed, three black girls stayed. I was there by myself.

And one of these suite mates, the taller one, for some reason I think her name was Julie. But she came in-- I need to look at the pictures and see if I can remember her name.

But she came through the bathroom. She came in the bedroom where I was and very, very gently with great feeling said, I have some bad news for you, and I know I don't hear you listening to the radio. And so I said, what? She said, Dr. King was shot, and he has died. And she said it so gently, and with such warmth that I've always forgive-- I've always just appreciated that, that she seemed genuinely concerned about how I would respond. And then she said something like, are you OK? Do you want me to stay with you? And I said, no, I want to be by myself.

And then I got to some news or something, and people-- by that time, by the time she told me, people were rioting in the streets, in various cities. So somehow, even though I must have resigned from SSOC by then, they'd looked for me. And several of them, I think it was Jack, and I don't remember who else was in the car. But Jack came to me and said, some of us are going to drive to Atlanta. Do you want to go with us? And I'm a resigned SSOC member, right? I've given them whatever this letter was and I said, I'd love to.

So we got into this little car. I don't remember if-- Joe must have been with us. I can't imagine Joe would not have been. I don't remember him. I just remember Jack. We got in the car. We drove to Atlanta the day of the funeral. And in those days, there was a little bluff looking over the church where King was going to be funeralized. It was his father's church. And, because we left very early, Furman, to drive there, we got there fairly early before the crowds did. And we went up on this bluff, that was overlooking the church, and we had a front row seat. And this little interracial group of Furman students was there-- has anyone else told you about this?

Dr. Makala: No.

Ms. Thomas: Really? This little interracial group looked down on the procession, the hearse, and the dignitaries. We saw the Kennedys. Mrs. Kennedy came and we saw Mrs. - - you could see it all from this little perch up high. And then afterwards, after the funeral was over, and the hearse had gone, and then dignitaries-- not the hearse-- but the dignitaries had gone, they left Dr. King lying in state. And then they let people line up. And so this little group of Furman students got in the line. And we passed by the casket, one by one. And for that, I'll always be grateful. So that's my memory of SSOC.

Dr. Makala: At what point did you decide, in that year, that you wanted to transfer?

Ms. Thomas: Yeah, I cannot for the life of me remember.

[LAUGHTER]

So I can tell you what the factors were. So I'd been, as I said, hanging out-- well, I didn't say this-- but I had been hanging out with black radicals. Some of them I'd met in Orangeburg. They started giving me books to read. One of them was Cleveland Sellers, who was later charged in the Orangeburg massacre. He had a house that was not far from my house, and he and his, then, wife, Sandy, lived there. And one of the young men that I had met at South Carolina State College would take me to his house. So I'd go to Cleve Sellers's house, and this little group of black radical students and Cleve had books that they were reading. They were reading books about black liberation, black powers, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X. That was the literature that students were learning about. This was the literature that began to turn me away from physics, right?

So I had already accepted to go to Furman but-- and I loved the Old Testament and I loved chapel-- but at some point, I was faced with the dilemma of what on earth do I think I'm going to major in here? Because the curriculum was not diverse enough for somebody of that interest set. So it was either science and math or what? So I mean, even if I had picked something like political science or sociology, they wouldn't have understood the literature and the lingo that I was becoming very familiar with.

And so that was one issue. That's when I began to realize I might need to go someplace-- and there's no such thing as-- there's languages but there's no study of Africa. I was getting interested in Africa. There's no place here for a young black radical student. So what would I major in? What do I see myself doing with my life? So that was factor number one.

Factor number two was the Orangeburg massacre because that was a traumatic experience that may have been the point at which I decided I wanted to leave the south. It was either that or the assassination of King. But that was, of course, not until April. So I think it must have been the Orangeburg massacre when I decided it was time to leave the south. I had gotten some material from, well, as I said, Vassar, and also, Michigan State University had given me some material about-- sent me some material. I think they sent it to all the National Merit finalists about their Honors College. So I'd heard about their Honors College. And Michigan State, I knew, had African languages and African Studies.

But I think it was the massacre because I was so desperate to get out that I remember-- so I was desperate to get out of the Deep South, not necessarily Furman. But I remember strategizing, thinking, how can I get my parents to let me transfer because I had a school full scholarship? Full-tuition scholarship, at

least. So how can I get my parents to let me transfer? So I came up with the one thing that would make them let me transfer.

There's only one thing I could have said, and that was, I'm so desperate to leave South Carolina. And keep in mind, I'd gone through that high school experience. They'd see me gone through that. They'd sent me to Furman. They'd hoped I'd be happy here. The Orangeburg massacre happened, so I said, I'm so desperate to leave South Carolina that I'd rather drop out of school than stay in college here. So those were the magic words.

[LAUGHTER]

And so they thought about it for a while. And it was pure bluff. It was pure bluff. I would not have dropped out of school. I mean, I loved school, but I was in a bit of a bind here. I wasn't sure where my future was here. So it worked, and they let me. I think it was only Michigan State, I applied to, as a transfer student. Because they had some kind of program about African Studies and, of course, I didn't end up going into that, but that's what got me out of here. And so I had to leave Furman which, by the way, was very painful because I had friends here. I'd met Joe here. Tyrone was a good potential boyfriend.

[LAUGHTER]

He didn't turn out to be, but it was a good potential boyfriend. Of course, Mary Beth, here. Hare was here. I loved the religion classes. I loved choir. I even liked Dr. Johnson, who was a chaplain. But it was time to go.

PART II

Dr. Makala: OK. This is part two. [LAUGHS]

Ms. Thomas: OK.

Dr. Makala: We are back.

Ms. Thomas: Yes.

Dr. Makala: Could you tell us about your religious classes?

Ms. Thomas: Yeah.

Dr. Makala: The ones that had a meaningful-- an impact—

Ms. Thomas: Oh, meaningful impact. Some of the few classes I remember. So I grew up in a church. It was a Methodist church, Trinity United Methodist Church in Orangeburg, which was a wonderful church. Had a wonderful minister most of my childhood whom I greatly admired, Reverend Matthew McCollum. Charismatic figure.

Wasn't strong on theology. [LAUGHS] Not much, and so you would go and you'd hear the sermon but there wasn't a lot of depth in those years. I don't know. Maybe it's different now. But there wasn't a lot of-- there was reference to the Bible. And there were passages read from the Bible. But not a lot of depth.

And I was a searcher. I remember at age 13 being very curious about theology and raiding my father's library. So he was an ordained minister. Even though he worked as a college president, he was an ordained minister. So we had shelf-- shelf after shelf in our house with theology books. And so I picked out the ones that had meaning as a 13-year-old.

And those would have been CS Lewis' books. So I read them. And they helped me kind of understand what am I? Who am I? What's a Christian? Who's God?

And you have to understand that in those days Christianity was problematic. It was the 20th century's version of slavery. Because you have this obvious dissonance between so-called faith and religion and practice. So this oppression that we suffered in Orangeburg was by white Christians. And we were black Christians. But, in a sense, we felt superior to the white Christians because look at their lives.

I mean, they were the ones who were not showing brotherly love. So religion was a very important subject for me. I needed to understand what it meant, not just what the sermon was saying, but what did it all mean? And how could I rectify religious belief with what I was seeing in the civil rights era? So that was the big conundrum.

But underlying that was this deep curiosity about faith. So what the religion classes did for me was for the first time to give me some sort of in-depth insight into the nature of theological study that I didn't have to read on my own. And, in particular, I remember lectures. Isn't that amazing? I can't remember friends or places, but I remember lectures.

And I particularly remember the lectures about the origins of the Old Testament. Because until that time, I had no idea that there was evidence that there were actually different authors of the Old Testament. And the different narratives had

been pieced together to create the Old Testament was absolutely fascinating to me. I had no idea.

So that I had to leave my wonderful community in Orangeburg and come to a Southern conservative college university to find that out in a religion class was incredible. And that was actually more amazing to me than-- that had more of an impact on me than being the first black-- one of the first black women or whatever. That was something. You know, that Furman was worth something for that.

And then the Old Testament also, I never had it analyzed like that. I didn't know John and Matthew. I didn't understand why their accounts were different because they never explained that in church. So whoever was teaching religion in those days had a pretty good understanding of the variability of concepts of what the Bible means. And they brought an intensely intellectual approach to study of the Old and New Testament that was utterly refreshing.

And it helped-- it helped a lot with this conundrum of how can these people say they're Christians and they're acting like this? Because then I began to see what we see as Christianity now as a 2,000 year old evolution based on conferences, people coming together, and making decisions about what was biblical text and not.

So it lost a little bit of its on the pedestal, do not question, this is a unified whole of God kind of aura. So that was really very-- and so those classes freed me to think in ways I'd never thought. And they freed me to search.

So I actually did-- I actually did become a Bahai in part because of what I learned in those classes. Because I still felt myself a Christian. And I still consider myself a Christian. But those classes freed me up to think about matters more critically and not just the way they had been presented in a sermon. So they were very effective.

And then Johnson-- I don't know if anyone's written about him. He was a chaplain at that time. Was a wonderful chaplain. I don't remember his sermons. [LAUGHS] So he gave sermons. I do remember sitting in chapel because chapel was compulsory and seeing that nobody else was paying attention. It was sort of like people came because they had to stay. I do remember that.

I don't remember his sermons. I remember his talks. So he would every once in a while bring people together to talk. And one of those talks was actually in the part we were in for lunch. So it was in that little room. I think it may have been the same room we were eating lunch in. I don't know. I can't figure out the structure of that building. But it was near there.

And there were maybe 20 or 30 students in the room at the time. And we were all sitting in a circle. And he gave us just to talk about chastity, which was timely. [LAUGHS] I was 17 at the time, you know? And so I remember what he said after all this time. He said that a young lady had come to him and asked-- a Furman student-- had asked him to marry her, to perform the marriage ceremony. And so he told the story. I won't tell the story now. But he told us the story of this young woman and her triumphant ability to remain chaste before the wedding.

And I just remember that. It was just a wonderful talk. It wasn't a sermon. It was him sitting with students by the lakeside, talking about something realistic in our lives. And I thought that was wonderful, as well.

Dr. Makala: Did he do this on a regular basis? Or was this a spontaneous sort of—

Ms. Thomas: I think he had several talks. But I don't know if anyone would have recorded how frequent they were, or anything about them. They would just be in the memory of those of us who were there. But, of course, I noticed. Because of my background, I noticed genuine kindness from any of the teachers and I felt it from him very much.

Dr. Makala: And you were in the choir?

Ms. Thomas: I was in the choir. To this day, I get tears in my eyes when I hear the Messiah. I sing along. Handel's Messiah, so that's what we sang. And, of course, Sarah sang a solo. I remember that. I remember standing in the choir-- very spotty memories I have. I definitely remember standing in the choir singing my part. And that was really important as a way to kind of feel a part of the university. And of course I was a part. I was singing Handel's Messiah. So that was lovely.

Dr. Makala: You've talked about Sarah and Jovan as well. But is there anything else you'd like to add about your memories of them and your interactions with them?

Ms. Thomas: So the things, other things I say about Sarah, I'd tell you off camera. I wouldn't tell you on camera. Just lovely things but I don't want to say them because she might not want them said. But Joe-- Joe was-- I'm sure everyone talks about Joe who knew Joe. Extremely extroverted, joyful soul. With a little something off. You know, that something off was a little bit of tension, that was obvious. I found out-- I found out he was sometimes drinking because at a football game he was cheerleading.

And he had convinced me to go to the football game because I didn't go to football games. But he convinced me because he was cheerleading. And I was standing-- I remember standing and talking with them and smelling alcohol and

not understanding. Because I came from like a Methodist minister's house. So how could Joe be drinking?

But all of us first were under so much pressure. I totally get it. But I'll also tell you he was so friendly, so outgoing, that at first I thought he was trying to hit on me. [LAUGHS] So I was like-- I just knew-- I was kind of-- because you go as a freshman and you kind of scout out the guys. So I was looking at Tyrone and looking at Joe. You don't act on it. You just look. They just kind of like make friends with them or not. So I was very close to Joe. And I found out later he was gay. So that was it. [LAUGHS] So totally I was off on that one. [LAUGHS] It was not me. [LAUGHS]

And I also found out he was friendly with everyone. You know, so it wasn't me. [LAUGHS] But yeah, there was something really stressed out about Joe. It was really almost a high energy level to the extreme. Almost manic. I mean, if someone told me he was manic depressive, I would not be surprised. I have no idea that he was. I'm just saying he had periods of manic tendencies, particularly the cheerleading. [LAUGHS] That's just sort of like-- there's actually a picture in the Bon Amie yearbook for 1968 when there's a group of people with instruments. And there's Joe. And he's going like, you know, whatever.

And that's the way he was. Just sort of like out there. You know? So it was good to have-- Joe kind of knew the ropes. Joe obviously was a senior. He'd been there for a while. I think he seemed to have an interest in friendship. He was a leader. We considered him a leader among the black students as well as all students. But there was something very sad about Joe.

Dr. Makala: Is there anything else you'd like to add or would like to say that we haven't talked about or I haven't asked?

Ms. Thomas: I think my story at Furman begins and ends with that summer program. It was such a wonderful program. I've always just appreciated how much that did for me. Not only academically and socially, but you have to understand. I was coming here almost as a refugee from systematic white racism. And that summer program gave me a six week break from that, and an opportunity. It allowed me to go into adulthood knowing that there were decent white people, and that I could make friends with white people. And that Furman was not only a contender, I think it ended up being the only place I seriously considered coming to.

I might have not even applied. I mean, so Vassar wrote me without my asking them. They wrote and told me I was admitted. But it never occurred to me. And I should also say, you know, just the beauty of the campus was such an attractor. I just-- it was a beautiful, peaceful place where I found friends.

Dr. Makala: Well, thank you very much for sharing your time with us.

Ms. Thomas: You're welcome.

Dr. Makala: And you thoughts. Thank you, June.

Ms. Thomas: Yeah.