

## Eyewitness to Jim Crow Thelma Williams Remembers

**"Becoming whole means to me that we treat each other as human beings."**

*Thelma Williams lives in Natchez, Mississippi, where she serves as the Project Director of **Project Southern Cross**, a nonprofit educational program for secondary school students. **Project Southern Cross** also administers *The Mostly African Market*, which exhibits and sells crafts and fine arts from Africa and the African Diaspora, with proceeds supporting the educational operations of the Project.*

### To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- How is Ms. Williams' childhood description of her town in Shreveport different from or similar to the town in which you live today?
- What actions by Ms. Williams' or her mother shows the insidious way their world under Jim Crow worked? How their behavior had to adapt to meet the expectations of the white world.
- What does living under such a system do to a person's psyche? How did it affect, do you think, Ms. Williams' outlook today?
- What actions under this oppressive system allowed Ms. Williams some triumph over the system? Why was this so crucial to her "survival"--her mental, emotional, survival under Jim Crow?
- What character strengths does Ms. Williams reveal about herself in this account through her choice of anecdotes she has chosen to remember?

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My childhood [in Shreveport, Louisiana] was a fairly comfortable one. My mother was a teacher, my father was a doctor. And we had the freedom of our neighborhood, really. The neighborhood was not really mixed. There were two grocers in our neighborhood who were Italian. And their families lived over the stores that they operated. But with very few exceptions, there was no inter-mixing of the children.

Shreveport was, I think, about 100,000 people in the '30s. There was a Black area in what was called Lakeside, where we lived. There was an area called Allendale. But you see, these areas embraced black communities and separate white communities. Allendale certainly did. I knew of one area that was all black and another area that was all white in the same area that designated it down there. And in Allendale there was a solid white section because we used to have to walk through it to go to school. And this provided some interesting encounters. there would be fights or children would bump each other off the sidewalk. But they, I must say, parents were generally not brought into these fisticuffs. Which could have gotten really nasty, you see, because it's a black and white situation.

What we [children] knew about [Jim Crow in our neighborhood] was almost rumor. You see, the parents would whisper when these events occurred. I can remember one event when I was in elementary school. Coming home, one afternoon, we saw police. White policemen in front of a door that was just off the street that we were on. And we didn't stop because we, I guess, knew better. And a little bit later, we heard by way of the grapevine, I don't know how the other children got it but they passed it on to us, that the police had been in this house in the middle of the night before. They had knocked at the door and demanded that a male occupant of the house be

turned over to them. Now, as it turned out, he was not there. But the rumor also stated that he was put into a hearse that belonged to the mortician, who lived next door to us incidentally, and carried across the state line in order to escape this encounter. Now I don't really know what the man was accused of doing, but that was the story that the children put together somehow to explain this large contingent of police in front of this house the next morning. And this is sort of typical of the kind of protection that we were given. Unless the children overheard some of these whispered conversations, we'd never know it had occurred.

On occasion we used to go to the downtown area when my mother went for groceries. Well, the stores were owned by whites and the customers in the grocery stores and the furniture stores and dry-goods stores, I guess, were mixed. One had problems, however, because if you went in, in front of a white customer, you were very likely to be told to wait until after that white customer was served. I've not really witnessed that, but I've heard it so often, that I'm sure it happened. Now for clothing, we would be carried in to the store, fitted and we would come out. I was not aware of the fact that wherever we were fitted the clothing was probably segregated. I know it was for adults. So it probably was for children too. So if you went into a store to buy a dress. If you were allowed to try it on, and sometimes you were not allowed to try it on, but if you were allowed to try it on you might well be taken into a supplies closet as opposed to their regular dressing room where they allowed white customers to be served.

The downtown area, as I said, [was] predominantly owned by whites. I can think of only one black store owner in downtown Shreveport when I was growing up. He had a newsstand. A very good one, as a matter of fact. You could get any creditable newspaper that was published in the United States in this man's newsstand. So the whole of Shreveport went to Mr. Gilmore to buy papers. These were the days when almost every city, even Shreveport had two daily papers. And most cities of any size had more than that. Plus some excellent news coverage. With...hoods on, when it came to the racial problems. I don't mean KKK hoods, necessarily. But blinders on when it came to the news. But you got very good newspapers. And Mr. Gilmore's store served the city. But I don't see another black store owner in downtown Shreveport at that time. I have lived in other southern cities where stores did not serve black customers at all. I can't say that of Shreveport.

For 14 or 15 years after I was born, my mother was an elementary school teacher. She then resigned from the school system and took a job with the Farm Security Administration. She was also a very courageous woman and they needed courage for that particular job in those days. She and her co-worker, a black man, had to carry pistols in their cars when they went out, and particularly at night, to visit their clients. These were [African American] people whose homes were located in the rural areas, not in the cities, you see. Farm Security was set up to try to raise the economic level of all farmers who had come from the sharecropping system and were moving into [becoming] land owners. Their houses were generally inferior, the way they grew crops, they needed assistance in learning these. And the Farm Security Program was set up to sort of assist them.

The problem was the rural land owners did not want these people to advance economically so there was a great deal of animosity. And finally they had to shut the program down altogether in Nachodoches Parish in Louisiana because there was so much antagonism and threats that were, could have been deadly.

[Ms. Williams' father died when she was eight, leaving the family in reduced financial circumstances. When she was thirteen, she was sent to North Carolina to live with an aunt, and she stayed on to attend St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina. Many of the restrictions of Jim Crow were as evident in North Carolina as they had been in Louisiana.]

There were these hard separation lines that you simply did not cross. Streetcars, buses, whatever they were in those days. The signs that Rosa Parks, Mrs. Parks [defied] were all over the south.

[The signs directed blacks to sit in the back of the vehicle.] You sit behind this sign. And the sign was moveable, incidentally, on most buses. You could move it up or down, but the signs were there. They had to be small enough for you to move them from one seat to another conveniently. But one sign said colored and the other side said white. [And] the movies? I'm sure you've heard about the movies. **You sat upstairs** and went in [through] a separate door.

[St. Augustine College was all-black, but] the faculty was not. As a matter of fact, at the time I went we had a white president and maybe the librarian. Those are the white staff members. The remaining were black. It never occurred to me [at the time] that I had gotten a different kind of philosophy, I suppose, of education from the people who went to other black schools. Now I realized that there were differences in course offerings and so on. But I was listening to John Hope Franklin who taught at my college. As a matter of fact, he taught me history. And he pointed out that our school followed the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. That you kind of work for what you need and get and you kind of don't make waves. Now, again. I was not aware of that. Hadn't even thought about it, to tell you the truth. But it was an interesting period in my life from that standpoint because just about everybody on the campus had a job. There was no class structure, if you like, on the campus. We were all on equal footing.

In a way, [boys and girls] had the same problems. You couldn't do these things you wanted to do. But in a way, women and I suppose girls, could push the system further. Harder than men. There was almost no nonsense taken from a black male. As a matter of fact, I have often said that if you wake somebody, some Caucasian, up in the middle of the United States, and show them an angry black male, they'll have a heart attack. So in a way, girls could get away with more. You know, we could kind of push that system. I can remember going to a filling station once and pulled up and asked for a restroom. And there's a very big sign saying there's a restroom, but the man says, "We have no restroom." So I said, "Nope. Don't want your gas." And I closed the door and drove off. Now I felt comfortable doing that. My brother did not. Because there was no guarantee that they wouldn't take this as an offense on his part. He wasn't supposed to be that kind of pushy... So there were instances when, yes, we [women] had special problems. Because we were at the bottom of that same trough that all other American women are at the bottom of. But in a way, a black woman in the south could get away with a bit more. I can remember a friend of my mothers used to say frequently the two freest people in the south are the black female and the white male.

This great divide is so deep, and [we] started recognizing its existence so early, that by the time we were in college, it was just life. It was a living, breathing thing. And we would object sometimes. I can remember one classmate, really, who decided that she was going to go to a movie and sit downstairs. So she wrapped her head in a turban and went in and in her best Spanish accent, asked for a ticket. And they let her in. Well, you know, this was great. We thoroughly enjoyed this.

This is something that's going to take us more generations to get over. And it's not a problem only in black communities, it's a problem in white communities I feel strongly about as well. There is a sense of inferiority on the black side and a sense of superiority on the white side that has damaged the psyches of both. And although I think deep inside we felt that they were not superior, everything that we were fed from the cradle suggested that they were. And everything that they read or experienced from the cradle suggested that they were. So we come out with this monster.

At this stage of my development, at 76 going on 77, I am not bitter about the past. I don't know that I've ever had time for a lot of bitterness to tell you the truth. At the same time, I am not hopeful about the future unless we can do something about these scars on both sides of that divide. Being told all your life that you are less than a human being takes a huge toll. Being told all your life that you are a superhuman being takes a huge toll. This does something to your humanity that you don't stop to think about. Unless we can handle those concepts, come to

thoroughly understand how damaging they can be, [I don't think we'll be able to] do something about becoming whole. And becoming whole means to me that we treat each other as human beings.