

The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove podcast
[Episode 2](#) transcript 10/18/2021

Thelma Anderson Gibson:

Mama always said that she wanted her children to get an education. She wanted us be able to go to school, get an education so we wouldn't have to do what she was doing, cleaning up other folk's houses.

Rebecca Peterson:

You just heard Thelma Gibson, author, activist, nurse, and community leader, talking about how the black Bahamian immigrants settling in Coconut Grove prioritized education for their children in the belief that it would set them up for better lives. We'll dig more into that during this episode.

My name's Rebecca Peterson, I'm the Community Programs Manager at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens in Miami, Florida. Welcome to episode two of The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove; a podcast that explores Black experience in the Grove through history, stories of triumph and perseverance and hopes for the future, as told by residents, all designed to showcase how heritage is powerful and empowers us.

In episode one, we painted a picture of a tight-knit Black community in Coconut Grove and we heard from some descendants of its founders. We ended with a striking message from Carol Henley Davis Bird, a native to the Grove that segregation served to keep Blacks inferior, not only in the perceptions of Whites, but also, and this was surprising to me in the perceptions of Blacks themselves. Here's a quick replay.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

I can tell you this as well. This is the one thing that segregation did, is that as long as you kept us separate, it's easy to convince everybody that we are inferior. And as much pumping up and stuff that your teachers do for you to say, you're great and whatever, if you've never competed and you still hear this other voice telling you, you are inferior.

Rebecca Peterson:

It's interesting, Carol, I thought when you said, "by keeping us separate, it's easier to make everybody believe that we are inferior", that the *everybody* was referring to White people, and that's not where you were headed.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

Nope. We feel that way as well.

Rebecca Peterson:

Carol clarified that she didn't go through life feeling inferior, but she definitely felt apprehensive and unsure of how her skills and academic preparation compared to those of White students. Here she is.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

When I first started at UM, I was very apprehensive or intimidated because I had never competed with them, although I had done all these things in an all-Black situation, only to learn that it was not true at all, not only could I compete, I was at the top in that situation.



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Rebecca Peterson:

Feeling inferior to Whites, played out quite a bit in education and was only laid to rest, if it was laid to rest, once folks from the Grove went outside the Grove to live, learn, and work among Whites. Up next is Iral Porter, Carol's sister, talking about her experience with education; both Iral and Carol excelled in mathematics.

Iral Porter:

I felt that we got a better education than the students once the schools were integrated because our teachers. We had some of the best teachers who really, really cared. And like I said, I know when I got to college, my math teacher taught me from nine to 12 first year algebra, second year algebra, geometry trigonometry. When I got to Fisk, my freshman year and was taking first year college mathematics, I knew everything I had everything that he was teaching. My math background was so strong from high school that it just took me through college. In fact, when I got my MBA in both accounting, statistics, all of the math based courses, I always got the best scores.

Leona Cooper Baker:

The reason why we had those teachers who were so devoted to us, is because they had to come up in a time when they didn't get the good things that they should have got like equipment or what not, and they wanted to make sure they were going to see that the children who were being taught by them would really do their best.

Rebecca Peterson:

That's Leona Cooper Baker, she's lived in the same house in the Grove all her life, and she taught in the Miami-Dade County public school system for 32 years. She's also one of the primary history keepers of the Grove's Black histories and heritage. If you want to know something about the Black history of Coconut Grove, Leona is one of your first phone calls.

The teachers she's talking about really did set up the students, not only to do their best, but to excel. It's only in retrospect that the students realized how the hard work and dedication of the teachers enabled them to excel. Only when those Black students were studying among White students did they realize how prepared, how capable they were. Here's Carol again.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

I went to Carver, came out valedictorian, math was my area. I went to college in math at Fisk University, did very well there and still the first time I walked into a classroom at the University of Miami for my Masters, and I think I was the first Black to get a Master's in math from there, I felt somewhat intimidated because of what I've always been told. I quickly found out that really my education was superior because I was helping all my classmates. One teacher who was renowned, asked me to teach his class when he had to go out of town and it was my own class.

Rebecca Peterson:

Carol also pursued a PhD, finishing all, but her dissertation in computer science and went on to work as a mathematician for the federal government. She retired her career as the assistant Dean of Student Affairs at Howard University's School of Business. Education was extremely important in the Black community because it was the path to success and achievement. Here's Carol again, talking about primary school education for Blacks in the 1930s.

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Carol Davis Henley Bird:

When public schools were started, they just figured that you didn't need what you needed for the Whites because they didn't think Blacks were capable. That's why they didn't go beyond eighth grade or sixth grade because they didn't believe that Blacks needed to go to high school. It was the matter of thinking and in most areas of the South, you will hear that the early schools started with churches and private concerns even before there were public schools and then even after, because they were more dedicated to the learning.

Rebecca Peterson:

Carol notes in a different conversation that Carver and other Black schools only went to eighth grade, so if a Black student wanted further education, they needed to go away. They had to leave Miami and their families to continue their education. This was all part of a segregated system and segregation laws in effect for essentially 100 years, meant to marginalize Blacks by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. It wasn't until 1968 that segregation laws were repealed. To put that in context, the youngest matriarch featured on this podcast is in her early 70s, that means that every single one of these women was born before those laws were repealed. Here's Enid Pinkney, who we heard from in episode one, she's about to sum up in 19 words, why more than 50 years later racism is still so deeply ingrained in our society.

Enid Pinkney:

I remember Dr. Gilbert Porter, who was Assistant Superintendent. He said, "the same people who were administering segregation are now administering integration, so we have the same problems."

Rebecca Peterson:

Enid goes on to say that integration was ineffective from the beginning, but despite a system designed to suppress them, Blacks respected themselves. They were determined to achieve and valued their heritage. Oftentimes they felt they were swimming against the current, but they didn't waiver. They, Enid and others in the community, persevered through systemic racism even as it was masked in integration. That perseverance made them able to achieve more than laws and society allowed them to believe they could.

Enid Pinkney:

So that's the reason why, even though the laws tried to make you feel inferior, I never felt inferior because I was always told you're just as good as anybody else, or maybe better. People will respect you if you respect yourself. You don't have to accommodate what they want for you. I think that that's why I've been able to get things done as I have, with working with the restoration of the Hampton House that was a big project. And also with stopping developers from building on the Black abandoned Lemon City Cemetery.

When I got into that, I found out that my grandfather was buried there, I didn't know that when they first came and called it to my attention that these developers were gonna put three affordable housing units on this property and we found out that it was a cemetery, the City of Miami had given them permission to develop that property.

And so to fight the City of Miami and the developers with money, and they had lawyers and I was like David with a slingshot; but we won. We compromised to the extent that one of the buildings,

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when it was called to my attention was halfway up. We let them finish that. There's one building on the cemetery, but we made them move the other two buildings and put them someplace else in respect to the dead.

I just felt that my grandfather had something to do with the guidance and the leading of be in that fight to preserve the Lemon City Cemetery. Now there's a monument with the 523 names of Black people that were buried there.

Getting into all these fights with government, I just learned you have to stick your neck out there and stand up for something.

Rebecca Peterson:

Enid, she's a powerhouse. Born in 1931, she spent almost 40 years in the Miami Dade County public school system retiring as an Assistant Principal. And in 1998, she was elected the first Black President of Dade Heritage Trust, an organization working to preserve Miami Dade County's heritage. She's currently writing a book and has produced a documentary on the Hampton House she mentioned, which is just one of the many sites of Black heritage throughout Miami that Enid has saved.

In our time with these women, these matriarchs, we realized that achievements like Enid's, though remarkable were not rare. This community is full of people working to elevate Blacks and improve Black experience and through their work are making long lasting contributions. But let's be clear here having so many stories from people who are accomplished isn't the remarkable bit; what's remarkable is the amount they've achieved, despite all the obstacles like segregation and inequality barring their way.

And as we're hearing, so much of that achievement is anchored in determination to excel, instilled by parents and by teachers hoping to pave the way for a better future for younger generations. Here's Iral Porter again, she's talking about a program she created to prepare high school students for success through medical school and into their professional lives as medical doctors.

Iral Porter:

I loved my work. I loved the students. I loved the support, not only as a part of that program. We had three different programs funded by the federal government, which I was director of, wrote the grants for and received the funding: the Health Careers Pathways Program; then I had the post-Baccalaureate program, which was a separate program. I had another program which was the Center of Excellence for Minority at Medical Education.

We had about 290, almost 300 students who when I left, had come through some part of our program who were admitted to and graduated from the University of Kansas School of Medicine. These were our success stories. And when I retired, 55 of those students came back to my retirement from all over the country. And I still keep in touch with some of them, from time to time they'll call or they'll email.

Rebecca Peterson:

And here's Thelma Anderson Gibson who worked as a nurse. She kicked off our episode saying "education meant we didn't have to do what mama did." Thelma took great risk to use Enid phrasing and "stuck her neck out;" for respect for herself, for her patients who were Black and for those who would come up after her.

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Thelma Anderson Gibson:

I worked all those years. I went to Jackson Colored I and Colored II worked and enjoyed it. I had a great time, except that they were calling Black nurses Colored nurses and White nurses were called Miss or Mrs. but Colored nurse had to be called Nurse. And I said, "But no, I'm Ms. Anderson." I said, "Well, they can fire me, I'm a good nurse, I could work anywhere."

And I had this attitude. I had the attitude that I knew I was a good nurse and Ms. Mustard, Alice Isabel Mustard, was the Director of Nursing. I was in her office more than any Colored nurse you'd ever seen. They're so sick of seeing me and she said, "Girl go back to work, I hear you're a good nurse, but we have to call you Nurse". I said, "Well Ms. Mustard, I call you Ms. Mustard and I say, I'm Ms. Anderson."

I said, "and y'all could call me what you want to call me, but I'm going to say I'm Ms. Anderson." And I had these three youngsters who used to come from Booker T. Washington High School and they worked on the floors and when I told them, I said, "We have to respect our elders and not you young people call these people. Mr. and Mrs. You aren't gon' call these old people by their first name."

And they look at me and say, "but all the other nurses let us call...", I say yeah, but when I'm on duty, we're going to respect our patients. So those three always said how much they appreciated me making them feel like they were somebody, and having them to know that they had to respect the patients; and they were always thanking me for that.

Rebecca Peterson:

This work wasn't without its challenges though. Thelma's determination is clear when she talks about patients and clients calling her nurse and not Ms. Anderson. And I'll just say, given her last note about respect, Thelma and all the other women featured here have given me permission to address them by their first names.

Thelma's determination kept her going through job offers that got revoked as soon as hospitals learned that she was Black. She talks about that clearly in our interview. She would get letters of hire because she was qualified, and she had gone through all of the requisite schooling and the training, but when she arrived for the job for which she'd been hired, she was turned away ... because she was Black.

Sometimes the head nurse would hem and haw and say sheepishly that Blacks couldn't work in the operating room. Other times the head nurse would say outright that they couldn't hire Thelma because the hospital "didn't hire Blacks" to do that work. In the end Thelma returned to Jackson to work.

Although she never did return to the operating room, she became a Board Member at Jackson Memorial Hospital Health Trust from 1984 to 1991. In 1992, she was asked back by the President of Jackson and continued to serve until 2001.

In 2020, I joined Thelma to talk about the history of Black Coconut Grove in a program held at Vizcaya. We and several others explored the histories and questions about people who shaped the Grove, and why its preservation is important. After leaving Jackson Hospital Thelma went on to advocate for and support a lot of Black heritage preservation projects. For her and so many others in the community, it's incredibly important to preserve this heritage, both so people and their accomplishments aren't lost, but also because "young people," as Thelma calls them, are inspired by their history, inspired to do more or to do better and to make change.

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Thelma Anderson Gibson:

I have to say though that I am so proud of young people in what they're doing today in trying to help make change.

Rebecca Peterson:

More on that next time. The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove was created by

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Rebecca Peterson:

I'm your host, Rebecca Peterson. And production was generously funded by Cathy L. Jones.