



Interviewee: Thomasena Stokes-Marshall

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BEGIN INTERVIEW

Katherine Saunders Pemberton: What's today? The ninth. It's October 9, 2019, and we're here with Thomasena Stokes-Marshall to talk about her life and work. So, Thomasena, can you say your full name and tell us when and where you were born?

Thomasena Stokes-Mitchell: Okay. Thomasena Stokes-Marshall. I was born in the Snowden community of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, on February 13, which was a Friday, 1943.

KSP:: The day before Valentine's Day.

TSM: That's correct.

KSP: How would you define the Snowden community? What are its boundaries, and how do you sort of see it as a community?

TSM: The community of Snowden is primarily an African-American settlement community. Almost all of the families who reside here are descendants of African slaves who were brought here going back prior to the Reconstruction era. The community of Snowden is bordered by Boone Hall Plantation, Snee Farm, and Highway 526, which at one point in time was pretty much all farmland and all.

The folks who lived here, most of the homes were built by the people who live here. Many of the residents had the various skills, talent, and trades where they could build their own homes. So much of that still exists here in this community today.

KSP: And I know we'll talk a little bit more later about the African-American settlements community, because I know you're very involved with that. But tell us a little bit, going back to sort of the beginning. I know at the age of three you moved to New York City.

TSM: That is correct.

KSP: Tell us a little bit about your immediate family and maybe what prompted that move and who went.

TSM: Okay. I am the first born in my family. I am the only girl. I have two brothers. The difference in our age was 12 years and seven years. Being the girl, my dad was a World War II veteran. And I've heard him talk about after he was released from the war and coming back home here to live, he experienced an unfortunate incident where he was on a bus here. And sitting on the backseat. And a uniformed officer approached him with his firearms drawn and challenged him to get up off of the seat. Otherwise, he would blow his head off.

And that prompted my dad to say, you know, he could not live here. So, at that point in time, he made the decision that he would move our family to New York City. We lived in the Bronx, and I was three when we moved there. So, of course, my education and everything was through the New York City Public Schools system.

My dad was an electrician. I've always known him to work at least two jobs, sometimes more, to take care of his family. My mom was a beautician and she had her own business. So that left me to be the babysitter and to take care of the household. And my mom used to leave instructions for me on how to cook the food and everything. So, I was responsible for that and taking care of my two brothers.

And I guess in many ways that prepared me for a sense responsibility of taking care of people. Didn't know it or recognize it at that point in time. But in later years as I look back on it, I realize that now. After I graduated from high school, I went to NYU. Got a degree in public administration and community organization. In New York, they have a newspaper -- I'm not sure that they still have it today -- but back then, it was called The Chief and The Leader. And in those two newspapers, they advertise civil service jobs.

And I wanted a job that was going to pay well and provide benefits. So, I would get those two newspapers every week, go through it, and see what was advertised that I could qualify for. So, the first one I took was for the New York State Department of Corrections. And then the other one I took was for New York City Police Department. The Department of Corrections called me first. And I did not know... I guess being naïve... When I got the notice, it said Matawan State Correctional Facility. So I'm saying, "I've never heard of Matawan State Correctional Facility." So I'm saying, "They must mean Manhattan."

So I responded to it positively. Okay, I'm going to take this job. It's in Manhattan, I'll figure out where it's at. And my brother-in-law...

Let me back up a little bit, because in between this, I got married. I actually ran away from home and got married, okay. Because of the abuse that my mom and I both were subjected to by my dad. I knew that that was not a life that I could live. So, I had a boyfriend and I decided, okay, I got to get out of here. So, I ran away from home, I got married. And a year after I got married I had my daughter.

So, in between that, taking the exams for the Police Department and Department of Corrections, I worked for the Department of Corrections for five years. Having never been exposed to incarceration on any level, it was a job that provided a decent salary and the benefits that I was seeking. In doing so, I found myself in the midst of inmates who had all kinds of crimes, had been involved in. But I found that to be a teaching and a learning experience for me, even to the point where some of the inmates that I was responsible for were people that I went to school with.

It was a learning experience in that I was able to engage and involve with the inmates and still do my job in a responsible manner, but I learned from them. I learned a lot about their ways and manner of committing crimes. And also I have to say that being the only female in my family, to a great extent I was sheltered. So I was never a street person. So, most of the things that I learned about the streets, I learned from the inmates in the jailhouse those years that I spent in the Department of Correction.

So, after being with them for five years, I got a call for the NYPD, for the Police Department, which was what I really, really wanted. So, I accepted that job, went through the Police Academy, and was assigned to precincts primarily in the Bronx. I worked almost every precinct in the borough of the Bronx, and special details like senior citizen crime prevention, PAL youth programs and things like that.

And I got laid off in I want to say it was 1975, when there was the financial crunch. And I got a job working for a drug company. Lederle Laboratories in Pearl River, New York. And I stayed with them I guess about a good two and a half years until the city kind of recovered and called me back to work for them.

And when I went back to work for NYPD, I was assigned to a precinct. Actually, it was a precinct that I lived in, all right. So, that was kind of gratifying, because it was a precinct that I lived in, and the people that I'm serving were people that I was familiar with, both adults and youth. And I got involved primarily with the youth. And there was a detective, Tommy [00:10:27 Lyons] was his name, who specialized in community affairs. And I used to go to him to get information about the various programs and activities for the youth program.

And he approached me and he says, "Do you know that the work that you're doing, it's not only crime prevention, but it's also community service?" He says, "Would you be interested in the Community Affairs Division?" So I said sure. I mean it took me out of uniform. Whereas I was able to become a lot more intricately involved with the community residents. I mean block associations, tenants associations, youth programs, the PAL. So there were a host of different programs and activities. The churches, the businesses, the politicians brought me in contact with.

KSP: This is so interesting. Because I feel like from your education to the work that you did, not only in the prisons, but especially in the Police Department, the thread is community engagement and community service --

TSM: Exactly.

KSP:: And that's something that you've kept going once you returned. I guess to go back a little bit. During your childhood and young adulthood, did you -- even after you all moved to New York City -- did you come back to visit family a lot?

TSM: Oh, yeah. Because the majority of my family always remained here. My grandparents, my great-grandparents. And throughout the years, I would come back, especially like during the holidays, and spend time. During summer vacation. And as a child I can remember this community here, in so many ways it was self-sustaining. Like when I talk to people about this community, and I look back, and I reckon that we literally lived off of the land. The farms and any kind of vegetables, fruits, or the animals. We had the cows, the chickens, the pigs. I could remember my grandfather killing a hog once a year and curing it, and we'd eat off of that almost the whole year.

KSP:: How different was that than New York City? Did you feel like you were just inhabiting two different planets in a way?

TSM: Mm, hmm, to the point where I says, "I can come here to visit, but I don't ever want to live here."

KSP:: Did you, as a child, did you ever feel the difference with racial relations or tensions in this area, as compared to New York City? Or did that just kind of wash over?

TSM: It was different in that... Of course, New York, the life I lived there, the exposure to people of many, many different races, okay, was much more engaging. When I would come here, and the exposure to people of other races, other culture, was limited. I didn't have that kind of exposure.

KSP:: Right, in sort of a bubble.

TSM: Exactly. To the point where I'd say, okay, when I'd see a white person come to the door and say, "Oh, that's the insurance man." It wasn't something -- I'm serious. It wasn't someone that, you know, we engage with. My grandparents may have engaged with them, you know. But on the whole, no. It was not that kind of close-knit or involved or engagement with the Caucasian population.

My grandmother on my mom's side of the family, she was a midwife. So, she delivered me and probably at least half of the people that live here in this community.

KSP:: Talk about community service. You definitely got it.

TSM: Absolutely, absolutely.

KSP:: Now do you remember... So, are your childhood memories mainly of Snowden or did you kind of -- was there a broader kind of familiarity with the Mt. Pleasant area or Charleston? Or was it just very --

TSM: No, no, not Mt. Pleasant. Not Snowden. That was very limited. Because the time I spent here was limited, compared to my life in New York. And at the same time, the amount of time I spent here, I have to admit that it wasn't about learning about the history, learning about the culture. I didn't focus on that at all, I have to admit that, okay. It wasn't until after I retired from NYPD. I went to work for another company, it was called Coro, where the focus was on leadership development. And I learned a tremendous -- again, about the community, about the engagement, about making that kind of connection with people who were in leadership positions in the community.

So, I worked after I left NYPD. I think I worked for them for about a good year and a half to two years. Because I retired in '91. I came back in '93, okay. So, my mom was a victim of Alzheimer. And knowing as I reflect back on how my dad would treat her, and knowing that she was not only a victim of Alzheimer, but also maybe subjected to that abuse, I just could not stay in New York. So my husband and I, we made the decision to move back, to move here.

Actually, at that point in time, we were looking to buy a home in New York. And when we compared what we wanted our lifestyle to be and what it would cost us to live that lifestyle in New York, versus coming back here -- we had land. So we decided to build. So we built the house, and we moved back here. And I was able to take care of my mom until she passed.

KSP:: Now, was your husband also from New York, or was he from here?

TSM: Mm, hmm. He's an original born and bred in New York, okay.

KSP:: I think it's interesting, and I was talking to April on the way here. We were saying, you know, several of the people that we've talked to, there seems to have been -- I don't know if it's still the case -- but there almost seems to have been -- your story is not unusual. People from the Sea Islands, the Low Country, going to New York -- in the African-American community -- going to New York and coming back. Sometimes growing up in New York and then coming back on their own. Sometimes being sent by their mom back to grandparents or whatever. Did you know anybody when you were in New York with sort of similar South Carolina roots?

TSM: Oh, yeah.

KSP:: So there was kind of a network there?

TSM: Absolutely. My mom was one of five girls. And my mom and her youngest sister. The youngest sister was the first in the family to have a college education. My mom, she went to a cosmetology school. And the oldest sister had moved to New York. So actually, all of my aunts, with the exception of the youngest one, lived in New York. Moved their families to New York, okay. So, I had that close connection with that side of the family.

And then I also had the close connection with my grandparents here. And I have to say, as I look back on it today, within the Snowden settlement community, it was a lot different than it is today. The community, it was a community in every sense of the word. It was a though whether we were related by blood, or whether we were related by marriage, it was --

KSP:: Or just went to the same church --

TSM: It was a big, yes. It was like a big family. Nobody wanted for anything. We shared everything. We did not lock doors and stuff like that, you know. It was just a totally different world at that point in time.

KSP:: I imagine as a child -- I know we're skipping around -- but I know as a child, you know, this kind of almost rural setting. You probably did all sorts of things, like with your play that you could never do up in the city.

TSM: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. Like I can remember coming back during the summer and my grandmother would say, "Go out there and pick a row of beans so I can put it in this pot for dinner." Or some okra, or tomatoes, things like that. And also where we lived, we were able to -- we called it The Hill. Just five, 10 minutes from where I am here now. My granddad would get a crate, and he could walk out to where the creek and the water and the ocean was, and he'd go fishing and crabbing and shrimping and everything.

So that like I say, we lived off of the land. If it wasn't from the sea, it was the animals that we had on the land, and the food that we planted.

KSP:: And like you said, you know, the sort of skills that people just had to be able to build structures and take care of anything that you needed to.

TSM: Yes. And you know, one of the things... When I came back home it was like culture shock for me in many ways, okay. Because first of all, I didn't really have a knowledge of the slave trade. How the Africans were enslaved and brought here to actually do the work, do the labor. They were the ones that were building the structures. You know, like I tell people as I've learned, when we look at the White House, that White House was built by Africans who had been enslaved and brought here. A lot of people don't know that. And they do not teach that in our school system, all right.

These are things that I learned because I deliberately put myself in a position to acquire that kind of knowledge and understanding.

KSP:: Because you were coming back into a community that while you were familiar with and you had grown up with in part, was still a little bit different than what you were used to, right?

TSM: Foreign, oh, yeah.

KSP:: So, I image kind of immersing yourself in the history and culture again would have been... [phone call interruption] But coming back into a community that was a little different than what you had gotten used to. Immersing yourself in the history and culture would have been a way of kind of rediscovering it, I guess.

TSM: Not even rediscovering, discovering it.

KSP:: For the first time.

TSM: For the first time, okay. I knew nothing about sweetgrass baskets, okay. I would visit the market and I would see them, and they would be gorgeous and beautiful and expensive, and I knew nothing about the history of it, and the contributions that the sweetgrass basket made to the whole rice culture that helped to make a tremendous number of plantation owners quite wealthy.

KSP:: Huge wealth.

TSM: Exactly, exactly.

KSP:: Well, and I was going to ask you, do you remember as a child any of the sweetgrass basket stands?

TSM: I didn't focus on that until after I came back home and then lived here. And how that really came to my attention? After I came back home and took care of my mom and she had passed, I found that I had time on my hands. I was retired, and I'm not a person to just do nothing, just lay around. And while she was sick, I had nonprofit organizations that helped me to help her, okay. So I says, okay, you know, it's time for me to give back.

So, the first nonprofit that I got involved with was East Cooper Meals on Wheels. And what I found with that organization was that... First, my husband and I, we used to go and pack the food. And that provided an opportunity for me to meet other people who were engaged and involved in the community. And we did that for about a good year, a year and a half.

And then not only did we package the food, but then we started taking it out and delivering it. And what the delivery aspect did was to allow me to really get to know the community. To really get to know the people in the community. It was a grass --

KSP:: With the elders --

TSM: Absolutely. The grassroots, you know. So, that was a real eye-opener for me. That motivated to say, "You know what? I need to be more engaged. I need to learn more about the people here in the community where I live. I also need to learn how I can better serve those people." So, that's when I started going to council meetings.

KSP:: Right. Talk a little bit about kind of your familiarization campaign with sort of the levers of government around here.

TSM: Okay. I started going to Mt. Pleasant Town Council meetings. My husband and I, I'd drag him everywhere with me, you know.

KSP:: Not for anything specific. But just sort of to see how it all kind of works?

TSM: I wanted to know how -- who the decision-makers were, and how the decisions were being made. And how those decisions would impact and affect people's lives. So, I would go to the council meetings, and I'd sit in the audience. And I would hear the mayor and council members. They'd have a brief discussion. Someone would make a motion, someone would second it, they'd vote on it, and it was over and done with. And I'm saying, "Well, what the heck happened?" I did not understand. So I says, "I can't settle for this."

So, at the time, Mac Burdette was the town administrator, and I reached out, I contacted him and I explained it. I says, "I'm going to council meetings every month, but I don't know what's going on." So he says, "Well, Miss Stokes-Marshall," he says, "You know, we have council committees that council members serve on. We have a chair and other council members who serve on the various..." and it was like maybe 10, 12 different committees. "And they meet the week before council meeting and discuss whatever the issues are. And then they make a recommendation to full council, and that's the end product that you're witnessing."

So I says, "Oh! Okay." So, that means, I need to go to the committee meetings. So at that point in time, I started going to all committee meetings, all right.

KSP:: This was like a full-time job, in a way.

TSM: In many ways it was. Because what I discovered was that when you go to the council meetings, committee meetings the week before, all too often the items that are on one agenda can very well affect or impact items that are on another committee agenda. They're interrelated. And I'll say like a developer's project who wants to do a subdivision. The traffic issues, the impact on the schools, and all these things are discussed, okay, before it gets to council meetings. So that in itself was an education for me.

And then the other thing that really disturbed me was there was no one on council that looked like me. Okay. I'm saying, there's no diversification. Not only on Council, but even the committee meetings. The committee chairs. So I'm saying, "Nah, I can't just settle for this. I've got to try and make a change." So with that, I decided that, you know what? I'm going to run for a seat on Mt. Pleasant Council. And this was in 1996. And I had a lot of people that said, "Oh, you know what? You will never win." I said, okay, it won't be because I didn't try.

So, I ran in '96 and I lost by about 300-and-some-odd votes. And I'd only been back since '93. February of '93. So I says, "You know what? If I can come that close in three years, I should be able to continue going to these meetings and educating myself. And when I come back two years later, I should be able to do this." And that's what I did. I came back in '98 and ran.

And you know what? During that time, in addition to going to council meeting and the committee meetings, I also got involved with a number of different nonprofit boards of directors. Like Meals on Wheels. I joined their board. I ultimately ended up becoming the president of that. I worked with Habitat for Humanity, Juvenile Diabetes, some of them I don't even remember anymore, okay.

KSP:: There's a long list.

TSM: Yeah, okay.

KSP:: A very long list.

TSM: By becoming involved with these different nonprofit boards, that only expanded my education about my community --

KSP:: And people now know you.

TSM: Exactly. To the point, in '98 when I decided to run for the second time, I literally had people who would come and knock on my door or call me and say, "I want to work with you on your campaign. I want to serve on your campaign." And they did. I always tell anybody, "Don't make the offer to me because I'm the kind of -- I will call you." And that's what I did. So I was able to build a tremendous supporting campaign that was really diversified. I mean I had blacks and whites and men and women. I had telephone -- my telephones lines are probably sitting around here. I think I had about five different telephone lines. People would come in and make the calls and everything, you know.

And it worked. It paid off. I was successful in my efforts.

KSP:: You were the first African-American person to serve on Town Council.

TSM: And still hold that record today. I'm the first and only African-American that has ever served on Mt. Pleasant Town Council.

KSP:: What did that do for the community? Do you feel like this community like Snowden and some other, you know, especially African... The kind of broader African-American community in Mt. Pleasant, do you feel like that they felt like they finally had a bit of a voice?

TSM: I think so. At the same time, I have to admit that as I look back on it, and when I did my research to... Went the Election Commission to see what the voting pattern was in terms of those people who were registered voters and actually went out and voted, and that would support me, the percentage of African-Americans at that point in time I think was like three percent?

KSP:: Just voting across the [00:32:56 unintelligible]

TSM: Yeah. So, that made me aware that, you know what? If I got every single African-American registered voter to vote for me, I will never get elected, okay. So that meant that not only did I have to appeal to a much broader scope of registered voters, but because of my interaction and my involvement and engagement across the board with all people...

One of the things that I would tell people, and I think at the time the issue of the flag, the Confederate flag. And I'd have people who wanted to know, you know, "What's your position on the Confederate flag?" And I'd tell them, "My position is that I saw it as an issue that was divisive. It did not bring us together, and I'm about bringing people together."

The other thing I do not allow to do is to put a label on me. I am a person just like you are. The same needs that you or your family or your community have are the same needs that I have, my family, and my community. And also, I credit NYPD as well I had a teacher in high school. Her name was Miss [00:34:21 Offer]. And I can remember a year where she went out of the room and I had my back turned to the door, and I was running off at the mouth. And she came in, I didn't see her. And she grabbed me by the back of my collar and says, "You come with me, since you have so much mouth."

And she entered me into the New York City High School Public Speaking Contest. And she selected various poems that I would recite on a competitive level with other high school students. And I won. I mean to the point where I was in The New York Times as the winner. But again, that empowered me with the ability and the confidence that I can get up in front of a group of people and talk to them on different issues, as long as --

KSP:: Maybe having a mouth on you wasn't a bad thing. It was a good thing.

TSM: No, it wasn't, it was a good -- it was! I mean I didn't know it then. But years later, I recognized that. So, you know, and I tell people, I have no problem to do a speech. I know [00:35:48 Michelle] when we were preparing for my award ceremony, she asked me, she says, "You have your speech ready?" I says, "I don't have a speech ready. It's in my head. It's in my heart. You know, once I do my research, and I know what I need to -- or the issues that I need to address, it's here." And I tried doing it from a sheet of paper or from index cards -- throws me off totally. I cannot do that, okay.

So, throughout the years, I've learned to just speak from my gut, you know. And I've had people to comment on how well I'm able to present myself on whatever the topics are, you know. But it's because I believe in it.

KSP:: Well, just like with that and kind of that high school experience in debate and public speaking, it seems like everything in your life has kind of not only made you the person you are, but has prepared you for a lot of what you've been doing.

TSM: It has, it has, you know, as I look back on it, I can see the connection. And maybe when years later I reflect back on it and I can see the connection --

KSP:: That got that spilled from this [00:37:04 crosstalk] --

TSM: Exactly, exactly, exactly, you know. I mean when Miss Offer pulled me out of that room and said, "You know, you got so much mouth, I'm going to give you something to talk about," never did I think that I would end up winning a public school speaking contest. And years later being able to use that skill in other areas.

KSP:: It's sort of wonderful to look back and realize the trajectory of everything. Let's talk a little bit about sweetgrass baskets and the festival. Because that was something that is very near

and dear to your heart. And you started the Sweetgrass Festival, which has been kind of bigger and bigger every year, and really impactful.

TSM: As I indicated earlier, I knew nothing about the sweetgrass baskets, okay. I served on the town, after I got elected, the mayor appointed me to the Tax Accommodations Committee. I did not know what the Tax Accommodations Committee purpose was. After I got on, I learned about it, okay. I know that revenue comes in from the tourist industry that helps to support a number of causes. And the lady who was the chairperson for that committee approached me.

She says, "Miss Stokes-Marshall, what do you think about doing a sweetgrass festival?" "I don't know. Let me think about it." Because I knew nothing about it. But I wouldn't say no. Let me check it out, you know?

So there were a few people that I knew who were basket makers and I approached them and asked them would they be willing to work with me. And they agreed to it. And as a result of that, I was able to form the nonprofit board of directors for the Sweetgrass Festival. I think our first year was like 2004 or 2005, that we did the first festival at Laing Middle School, which no longer exists. And from there, it just grew. Not only --

KSP:: And sort of the main goal of this was education?

TSM: Number one, education, but more so the preservation of the art form. Because that's an art form that was brought here by the slaves. The basket that was the most popular was the rice fanner, which was used to, they call it winnowing the rice. Where the baskets -- the rice would be placed, and they would do a motion called winnowing that would separate the rice from the shell, the hull that it grew in. And prepare it to be shipped all over the world, all right.

So, in learning that, I said, okay, this is something that needs to be taught. And that became a part of the education process. We got involved with the College of Charleston, with Avery Research Institute, as well as members from the basket-making community. And then I needed to learn about not only the sweetgrass, but the raw materials that were used. Where do they come from? How is it harvested? So we also, in the whole educational component in terms of the history of the baskets, where they came from, what they were used for, we incorporated a harvesting component, where basket-makers would go out to different locations where they would harvest the sweetgrass, the bullrush. The pine straw. All of the raw materials that were used to make the baskets.

KSP:: And I think over the years, too, those places where sweetgrass is grown have been impacted by development [00:41:08 crosstalk] --

TSM: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. One of the things I became aware of was because of the development, many of the locations where the raw materials were harvested no longer existed, or they were in gated communities and the basket-makers did not have access to it. So I'm saying, this is an issue. Some of the basket-makers would travel all the way down to Florida for the raw materials.

So what I did, I reached out, again, to Mt. Pleasant Waterworks, to some of the developers, [00:41:08 Tex Malls], who did the market at Oakland. And the Army Corps of Engineers. The Birds of Prey up on Highway 17. These were locations where the raw materials grew. Or, they either planted them, like the Mt. Pleasant Waterworks, I think they planted something like 2,500 sweetgrass plants there --

KSP:: It's ornamental maybe.

TSM: Right, right --

KSP:: But then [00:42:19 crosstalk] --

TSM: We had an agreement where those basket-makers that were involved with us in our organization could go to these sites and harvest the raw materials and use it.

KSP:: That's sort of a win-win for everybody.

TSM: Absolutely, absolutely it was.

KSP:: Because you've got things that are growing. And I think sweetgrass is beautiful.

TSM: It is, it is --

KSP:: It changes with the seasons. And it's natural and sort of it's a plant that is --

TSM: Every year, it comes back and has a beautiful plume on it.

KSP:: It's a native plant. It's probably hardier than a lot of the other things.

TSM: And a lot of the developers use it in their landscape around the Tri-County area.

KSP:: So sweetgrass baskets are one component of this sort of larger Gullah Geechee heritage that we sort of -- I feel like we see a little bit more understanding, hopefully, every year about the importance of that. And I know you've worked more recently with the African-American settlements community and with the International African-American Museum. Can you kind of just talk about some of your work in those arenas? How this all kind of, I guess --

TSM: Connects --

KSP:: It's all connected, right?

TSM: The African-American Settlement Community Commission came about as a result of a study that was financed by the National Parks Service and conducted by Charleston County. That study revealed that the settlement communities within the Tri-County area were in danger. And the threats that development posed would result in them just disappearing, no longer existing. So, as a result, when the results of that study came out and we became aware of it... I say "we," I

guess I started with maybe about four or five people, we said we've got to do something about this.

So as a result of that, we formed the African-American Settlement Community Commission. And we sent letters to Town of Mt. Pleasant, Charleston County Council, Mt. Pleasant Waterworks, at least a half-dozen agencies that were in a decision-making position to, number one, introduce ourselves and let them know what our mission was, and the fact that we expected them to work with and support us. And requested a meeting with them, because we wanted them to know who we are, our faces. And they all agreed to that, okay.

And as a result of that, we've been working with all of these agencies and municipalities. I think we're headed for our fourth year now. January coming will be four years since we've been in existence. And it's been quite successful, I have to say, in terms of the collaborative effort that we've been able to establish with the different agencies, nonprofits, municipalities. And their recognition that... When we talk about the Gullah Geechee culture, the heritage, the artwork, the music, the food. There's so many aspects of it that contribute to the economic benefits of this area here.

See, there's a significant economic impact that the Gullah Geechee culture and their trade, their culture, the arts, the food, the --

KSP:: Language.

TSM: And language, all of that had not been getting the kind of recognition and support that it should have been getting --

KSP:: It doesn't necessarily go back into --

TSM: No, it does not.

KSP:: That community.

TSM: It does not, okay. We had a meeting here recently with Dr. Bernard Powers from the College of Charleston who's now heading up the International African-American, and that's one of the points that we made. That with the museum, we wanted to include elements that will not just be within the confinements of the walls of that museum. We want that to come out and extend into the community where there could be tours. And we want to work very closely with Helen Hill from the Visitors Center. They have a board of directors. No diversification on that board. I want a seat on that board. I need to have a seat on that board.

Whereas we can then extend that opportunity for the economic impact beyond the walls of the museum itself. Whereas there may be even tours that we can set up. Let's say Brickyard Plantation, where the bricks were made, okay. Or into the areas where sweetgrass baskets are prominent. Like we have the Sweetgrass Pavilion in the Waterfront Park for the Town of Mt. Pleasant, which I fought for. Whereas we can probably bring tourists to that location.

But unless we have a seat the table and make the people who are in a decision-making position aware of these things, it's not going to happen.

KSP:: Right. I think that you're extremely passionate, and that comes through. And you back it up with really just hard work still, which is amazing. So, I know we talked about this long -- you have a huge long list of boards and commissions that you've been on. Coastal Community Foundation, East Cooper Meals on Wheels, [00:48:41 CARTA]. I mean the reach is really long here. And I guess if you had to -- this is always a tough question. But if you had to say what your -- a few of your accomplishments that have meant the most to you, what would a few of those be? Or does it just all kind of run together? Are there a few things that stand out as most important to you?

TSM: In my younger days, with NYPD and my involvement with the community, I think I was more focused on the youth. As I have aged, I recognize that there is a desperate need for there to be more focus on our senior population that is not being addressed in terms of housing, affordable housing. Medical services, just a host of issues to address the growing needs of our aging population. And I can identify with it on a number of levels. Number one, having to deal with both a mom and dad who both had Alzheimer, okay. I pray that I have not inherited those genes, whatever it is.

But with issues that I've had, that I have experienced, number one, I live by myself, okay. Isolation. There are lot of seniors who are living by themselves. That isolation. That's an issue. So one of my biggest accomplishments that I'm proudest of is the Thomasena Stokes-Marshall Senior Center, okay. I could remember... Actually, October. No, yesterday was 10 years.

KSP:: Awesome.

TSM: Since the Center opened.

KSP:: That's awesome.

TSM: All right. And when I started fighting for it back then, I didn't have the support of my council members. Mayor Harry Hallman was the mayor at that point in time. He was very supportive. So, I said okay, you know what? If Council doesn't support me, I'm going to go out and I'm going to form a coalition. So I did. And how I really focused in on the Senior Center, there was this woman, Maureen [00:51:17 McGuire], who was a retired registered nurse from MUSC, who had started her own business. And she and I happened to be sharing a table at a conference. And she says to me, "You know, are you aware of James Island Senior Center?" No, never heard of it, don't know where it is.

She says, "Well, you need to go." I said okay. So, she and I reconnected at a later time, and we did a tour of the James Island facilities. And when I left there, there was no doubt in my mind that was at the top of my list. And since Council didn't support me, I says, you know what? I'm going to form a senior coalition outside of Council. And I was able to do that as a nonprofit.

One of the people that served on that coalition was a lady... Actually, she was the CEO of East Cooper Medical Center. And at the time, Tenet was the parent company for East Cooper Medical Center, and they were in the process of buying land to build a new hospital. So I'm say, okay, you know what? Land, that's the most expensive cost. So, maybe, just maybe I can get them to donate the land for the Senior Center.

So, I went to Mayor Hallman and I presented this to him. He thought it was a great idea. We took it to Council. They couldn't say no. I mean all you got to do is ask, you know? So, we drafted a letter, sent it to the parent company, and they agreed to donate three acres for the Senior Center. And so I'm saying, okay, we got the land. Also, I knew that South Carolina Department on Aging, they had funds that had been designated for bricks and mortar to build a building. So I said, okay, if the coalition's got the land, and we've got money to start with the bricks and mortar, there's no way in the world Mt. Pleasant Council can say no, and not make some kind of contribution.

So, we went back to the Council and they agreed to put up the rest of the money to build the building. And that's how that came about, you know. And pleased to say we have a membership of over 3,000 members that uses that Center.

KSP:: That's amazing.

TSM: All seniors, you know, yeah, yeah. And I see the good that it does for our senior population.

KSP:: What advice would you give to young people coming up now, to say, if you want to get involved with your community. If you want to make a difference in your community.

TSM: Volunteer. Volunteer. That firsthand experience of helping people across the board. There's so many different areas and capacity that you can volunteer. I mean from the schools, elementary schools on up to the seniors. And the self-fulfilling reward that you get from knowing that you're helping to improve people's lives and fill a void. Money cannot buy that, okay.

The other thing that I've learned from volunteering is it opens so many doors. People will reach out to you and they're willing to support you. And like I said, I tell people when people come to me and they say, "Oh, if I can help you with so-and-so, you know, call me." I let everybody know upfront, "If you don't mean that, don't say that to me, because I will call you." And anybody who knows me, they know that I will do that.

So, volunteering, especially for our next younger generations, the millennial. I just finished two, Saturday it will be two weeks. For the past four years, I've been doing at the Senior Center the Senior Center Resource Summit. That's an event that's held on a Saturday from 10 in the morning until two. And we have about 40-some-odd vendors. And these vendors provide services in so many different capacities that our seniors would not know about. All too often, they're related. Like we have the judges from Family Court. Probate Court. Conservators. Guardians. People who provide various medical service. East Cooper Medical Center, they come

in and they do all types of testing that seniors may not otherwise have the opportunity to be exposed to.

KSP:: So it's just getting out there and kind of making those connection and then [00:56:22 crosstalk] --

TSM: Absolutely. One of the things that I learned from this year's event that I've already planned to incorporate in next year's event. What I found over the past four years is that pretty much I would say, 90, 95 percent of the people who attend our event are seniors. I need the next generation there. Because they need to be exposed to the needs of our aging population who may very well be their parents or other family members, so that they are empowered with that information that they know how to help.

I have to say that when I needed help with my mom and dad, Maureen, the woman who told me about Janes Island Center, I knew that she was a retired registered nurse. I knew that she ran her own senior business. So I went to her. I says, "Maureen, you know what? I need help. My mom and my dad..." So, she opened the door and helped me to weave through the maze. And it is a maze that you have to weave through to identify the kind of help and resources. All to often, they interact and they overlay each other. And if you don't have access to that information, then it's --

KSP:: It might as well not even be there.

TSM: Exactly, exactly. I've been fighting with the Town of Mt. Pleasant to establish an office on the aging that would help people to weave through that maze. They've been resisting me, but this is an election time that's coming up --

KSP:: I think they're doomed with trying to avoid you.

TSM: Yeah, well, as a matter of fact, on the 23rd of this month, the League of Women Voters will be doing a forum, a candidate forum at the Senior Center. That's at the top of my list. I'm going to put their question to those people who are running, you know?

KSP:: Well, as we kind of wrap up, because I know we've held you for a while, is there anything today that we... And I'm sure we could probably do another one of these and just talk even more in depth. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important to talk about before we sort of close?

TSM: I've talked about a lot of things, okay. One of the things that I would like to see more of across the board in all areas and capacity is diversification, okay. And I think that has a lot to do with the mental attitudes of people. And probably more specific with the African-American population. I'm the kind of person, I can go in any setting. I don't care what the make-up is. I'm going to go and I'm very comfortable there, and I'm comfortable asking questions and whatever.

But at the same time, I have to admit that throughout the years, my experience has been most people, especially with the African-American population, don't have that level of comfort.

There's I guess intimidation, for lack of a better word, you know. It's just something that they're not comfortable with. For a while I had my grandson here who lived with me. And he went to J.B. Edwards Elementary, Moultrie, and then first year in Wando High School. And I would go to every single Parent Teacher Association meeting. I had a need to know what's going on.

And as I would look around the room, you know, there may be three, four, five at the most, people that look like me, you know? And I'm saying, something's wrong with this picture. So, if there's any one area that I think needs to be addressed, if we could just zero in on the need for that diversification and inclusiveness.

KSP:: Get involved, yeah.

TSM: Exactly, exactly.

KSP:: I think that's a great point. Well, Thomasena, thank you so much for taking the time out to talk to us today. I think this is going to be a great addition to our archives. So, we appreciate it.

TSM: Well, thank you. It's been my pleasure. I'm delighted and really pleased that you ladies and the Charleston Historical Foundation were willing to do this. I see it as a part of capturing history, also. So many of the things that I've been involved in. And I think that's a good thing.

KSP:: It absolutely is.

TSM: So, I appreciate it. Thank you.

KSP:: Thank you again.

TSM: Thank you.

KSP:: All right.

END OF RECORDING