

Ernest “Stone” Thomas
Interviewed by Anthony Zaragoza
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Zaragoza: We’re here with Dr. Ernest Stone Thomas for the Oral History project at The Evergreen State College on August 25, 2020. Welcome, Stone, how are you doing?

Thomas: All right. How are you doing, Dr. Zaragoza? Brother Anthony?

Zaragoza: Not too bad, man. I’m not too bad at all. Start by telling us about your early life, your childhood and growing up, when you were born, where. Some things about your parents.

Thomas: I’ll be happy to do that. Thank you once again for the opportunity to participate in this project. I’m humbled that you all would seek me out and afford the opportunity to talk about Evergreen.

I was conceived in Anderson, Texas, and I was born in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, in the good year of 1947, November 2. I grew up primarily in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, until I was five. Let me regress a little bit and talk about I was born the third child to Master Sergeant Ernest Robert and Miz Lucille Ernestine Thomas. I have an older sister and we have an older brother who is deceased.

I stayed in Virginia until I was the age of five, which was when my father passed. He was a master sergeant in the US Army Corps of Engineers, the 95th Battalion. What you know about military history is that the 95th was the segregated Corps of Engineers that did all of the infrastructure work in World War I and II, and also worked on some of the dams in the United States. He was a master plumber. He died at the age of 58.

When he died, Brother Anthony, my mother relocated back to Austin, Texas, because Texas is where her family lives. Austin specifically, because before our father died, he bought a piece of property and a home in Austin. He did not want to go back to Anderson, Texas. That was where he was from. My mother was from a little place outside of Anderson—it’s big now—called Bryan, Texas. That’s where Texas A&M is located.

My mother was basically my mother. She was a housemother. We lived on the military base in segregated quarters, needless to say. But my memory of Fort Belvoir, Virginia, was behind our house there were a lot of maple trees. I remember them tapping those trees. I remember being young, and my older brother and I used to get in trouble all the time. We would get cut licking the taps of the trees and stuff. Needless to say, we’d get our butts whipped, and we’d go on and next week, we’d do the same

thing. And I remember snow in Virginia.

I remember going to the commissary with our father. My father was a master sergeant. He ran a battalion or platoon and a lot of people knew him. They used to call him “Daddio.” I used to think he was the biggest man in the world. But when I looked at his death certificate some years later, he was 5’8”, but athletically built.

I remember he used to play baseball. They used to play baseball on the base. They used to chant, “Here comes Daddio!” He’d do his thing and run around the bases and all that kind of stuff. At that time, he must have been in his early fifties and he was still playing baseball.

He eventually was succumbed by bronchial pneumonia. He was a heavy smoker. He caught some mustard gas when he was over in World War II, so his lungs were all messed up.

My memory of Virginia was that. Then when Daddy died, my cousin, Aaron, came and picked us up in Virginia and we drove down back to Austin, Texas. Needless to say, it was an adventure, brother. There were five of us—five children—and two adults. Of those five children, we inherited a set of twins. They were younger. I won’t give you graphic details, but what I will say is that if I was five, then they were two, and they weren’t quite out of diapers—now you can get the picture—traveling from Virginia through the South.

It was a really interesting experience, Anthony, because that was my first encounter with the Deep South. We went through Virginia, went through the Carolinas, down through Alabama, went through Louisiana. It was my first experience in dealing with the segregated South, the Deep South. Needless to say, it etched memories in my mind for years. I still think about it sometimes.

All seven of us were in this car and there was no roadside. There was no motel kind of thing. One night, we spent on the side of the road—we slept in the car—and I remember my cousin, Aaron, going and talking to the people and telling them that he had a carful of people and children and we needed to rest, etc. etc. This farmer said, “Yeah, that would be fine. Ya’ll just stay out there on the road. Pull your car out.” All that.

We were three days on the road and two nights. I remember going into Louisiana and we wanted some hamburgers. We stopped at this place and I remember getting there and going up, and the man pointing, “Get to the back. Get to the back. Get to the back. You know you can’t come up here in the front. Get to the back.” I asked, “Why do we have to go to the back?” He said, “That’s where colored people have to go.” I said, oh, man, this is a trip.

I grew up in Austin, Texas. I did all my elementary school in Jim Crow, which was a bit unusual in that in Virginia, the schools were segregated, the classrooms were segregated, but you had white

classrooms and you had African American classrooms. They were in the same building, but separate classrooms. In Texas, it was all African. As a matter of fact, the East Side of Austin was African, Mexicano, and poor Anglos, a strip, but mainly Americanos and Africans on the East Side.

I grew up going to Jim Crow schools. Graduated from L.C. Anderson High School, which was—I'm not trying to brag or nothing—the football dynasty. Last time we went to State was '63. Here's what was interesting. In '63-'64, we never competed in the university interscholastic league. We competed in what was called the Prairie View Colored League. As 1963-64 was that last time we went State Championship, in '64 Anglo schools in the UIL [University Scholastic League] started to come over into our community and recruit the talent, so that depleted from the L.C. Anderson High School, and a lot of the talent went over across town.

I chose not to go. I was recruited by Austin High, but I chose not to go because there was a lot of tension. I knew that had I gone to Austin High, I was going to get in trouble, because I was getting in trouble at the bus stop when people were telling us what we could and couldn't do, and expletives here, a lot of N words here and a lot of N words there.

Remember, the tension was there because you had the March on Washington, then the next two summers, you had Fair Housing and then you had the Voter Rights, and people were ticked off. We said, "Hey, bring it on." My major influence with regard to my social and political consciousness grew out of living in Jim Crow, and dealing with the residuals of Jim Crow.

I remember Madere and cousin Aaron—Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Ford—raised us after my mother died when I was seven. Madere was my mother's first cousin. We were raised by Madere and cousin, Aaron, Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Ford. Cousin Aaron was a janitor for the All Saints' Episcopal Church, and Madere was a cook—excuse me, Cousin Aaron was a sanitary engineer and Madere was a culinary artist. [laughing] She worked for St. David.

They were the ones who raised us. I can remember, Brother Anthony, them paying poll taxes, and having to deal with literacy tests. Madere and cousin Aaron were literate. Madere's sister was functionally literate. Our church, the First Baptist Church—I grew up in the Baptist church—would have literacy campaigns. We, as young people—I was in junior high school-high school—would help the elders decipher and read so that they could pass the literacy test. They got rid of the poll tax first, and the poll tax and the literacy test were the means of suppression of the vote. They got rid of the poll tax when they passed the Voter Rights Act, but they held on to the literacy test.

We're talking about Texas. It took Texas a couple of years. Juneteenth is the celebration of emancipation. It took two years to get from Washington, D.C. down to Texas for the captives to be

liberated. My social and political consciousness came out of an era of Jim Crow. I had the opportunity to listen every Saturday to the Honorable Elijah Muhammed. After that, Malcolm X would come on. This station was in Texas, but the DJ, we had three hours of African American music—rhythm and blues etc. Guess who the DJ was? Joe Tex.

Zaragoza: Who's Joe Tex?

Thomas: Joe Tex was an African-American blues man. He sang a song called "Skinny Legs and All." I heard Malcolm. I saw what Martin Luther King was doing. I was familiar with the works of Medgar Evers, when he got killed in Mississippi, I was eight years of age.

August 28 will mark the 65th anniversary of the murder of Emmett Till. I was seven years old when Emmett Till and the image of Emmett Till appeared in *Jet* magazine. You're talking about horrified, traumatized, to see what they did to a 14-year-old man-child. It stuck with me. When I talk about it, I can see the image. You're talking about a sense of fear about your existence. Seven years old and I'm seeing this and they're saying, "Don't ever be messing with no white women. Don't mess with white women." You go into a store you don't even look at the white woman. It's that kind of thing.

And 65 years later, Brother Anthony, from Emmett Till to George Floyd, and everything in between there. Watts riots, Harlem, New Jersey, Philadelphia. All of this. I'm saying, whoa, you live long enough, you can see history. You can see the dialectics of history.

After I graduated from high school, I went to Huston-Tillotson for one year. I need to get out of Austin. My level of political activity was such that I had some encounters with the Austin Police Department. It wasn't like I was having an interview with them or nothing like that. [laughing] I'll just put it that way.

We had a few confrontations, so by the time I got out of high school, I went to Huston-Tillotson. Our basketball team went to State Championship my senior year. Don't get it twisted. I was not a basketball player. I was on the team because if you played football, you played basketball. That was my senior year, so they said come on over and they would pay my tuition.

At 17, I became a father—my first son—so I could not play and work. I had to work to take care of my family at that time, my son. I really needed to get out of Austin, so I decided I was going to transfer after my freshman year from Huston-Tillotson, an HBCU. I looked at my options, and the way I decided the school that I was going to go to, Brother Anthony, was, number one, I was going to be a walk-on, so I looked at the football program to see who played outside linebacker and defensive end, what year they were, and were they bigger than me? At that time, I was a physical therapy major, so I looked to see about physical therapy and stuff.

I looked at Arizona State, Syracuse University, and Washington State. Syracuse, I looked at the weather forecasts and all that, and I saw 17 degrees. I knew that I didn't want to live anywhere where it was going to be 17 degrees.

Zaragoza: Not coming from Texas you didn't.

Thomas: No way. No way. But the Orangemen of Syracuse looked pretty good because Ernie Davis came out of there, and Jim Brown. But I say, nah. Plus, the outside linebackers and the defensive ends, they were 6'4", weighed 250. I said, nah, I can't do that. I was weighing a deuce and a quarter. Arizona looked pretty good, but it was 107 degrees in the summertime. I said, nah.

I decided to go to Washington State, so I transferred academically to Washington State. I didn't continue to major in physical therapy. My science background was somewhat limited. I got in an argument with the head of the physical therapy department because he called me out in front of the class and asked, "Why are you here? Why are you in this class? You don't have enough science to even think about being a major."

When you go through schooling that's very supportive, that never tells you you can't do anything, until I got to Washington State, Brother Anthony, all of my faculty members were people of color. No, there was one Anglo professor at Huston-Tillotson, but I never took a class from him. My academic career was nurtured by people who looked like me and were supportive. If they needed to stay after school to help me understand a particular concept, they would do that, so I was never invalidated as a learner until I got to Washington State.

East Side Austin, you settle your difference either knuckling or you out-talk somebody, you get out of it by your verbal manipulation. Well, I told the dude, "Hey, man, you know, I thought that's why you come to college so that you could learn. I know I don't have a lot of science in my background, but I want to be a physical therapist." "Well, you've got to have this, this, this, this, this, so you don't really need to be in"—

I got upset, Brother Anthony, and my verbal manipulation skills went out the window. I said, "Hey, man, you're talking all this crazy stuff to me. Why don't you meet me out in the parking lot?" [laughing] That's not the thing you want to say to somebody as a college student in a university. You can say that on the field, you can say that to a classmate, but I learned that you shouldn't say that to the director of the program. [laughing] Brother Anthony, the campus security got there before I got out the classroom. I said, "Oh!" "Hey, you threatened do-do-do-do." That was my start of my interaction with the Dean of Students at Washington State.

Zaragoza: It sounded more like an invitation than a threat, to me. Stone, what year did you graduate

from high school?

Thomas: I graduated from high school in 1965. I went to Washington State in 1966-67.

Zaragoza: What happens next in your involvement with the Dean of Students at WSU?

Thomas: It was pretty consistent. In '66-'67, things were getting hot. The movement is escalating. The black consciousness movement is escalating. We were wearing 'fros, and coaches are telling us we looking like monkeys. We got conflict on the field. Some of the players, they from Washtucna, Moses Lake. They'd never been around brothers, and so you've got a lot of cultural fusion but a lot of tension.

Zaragoza: How many students of African descent were on campus in '66-'67?

Thomas: Good question. There were seven of us on the team. I would say out of, I think the population was maybe 12,000 then—don't hold me to that—but of that, there were a total, with African graduate students and everything, it was under 50 of us. Most of us were ballplayers. There were a couple of brothers that were in the ROTC. There were more brothers than there were sisters when I first got there, and then there was a whole lot of African brothers from Nigeria who were doing agronomy. They were going back. So, it was less than one percent.

But it grew, because at that time, the push was to get more of us in higher education, and we were pushing for more of us to be at Washington State. I was at Washington State from 1966 to 1970. The population grew and the tensions also grew, too. Greek Row—you went to Washington State?

Zaragoza: I did. I know the geography you're laying out.

Thomas: You know exactly what I'm talking about.

Zaragoza: The racial politics haven't changed all that much in some significant ways.

Thomas: Yeah. We were told to avoid Greek Row, but our apartment, you had to cut—you remember where the pool was? We lived up the street from there, so you had to cut through. Every time we'd go through there, Anthony, I thought I was back in the South.

I left Texas and went to Washington thinking that the nature of the interaction would be different. People would be more liberal. That's what they tell you in the South. "You've got to hurry up and get out of here. Go to California, because people aren't racist out there." But what I didn't know was that Washington State had a lot of Southern migrants because of the fact that people—coal, the Hanford energy plant. All of my coaches were from the South—Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma.

In answer to your question, I saw the Dean of Students. We became real familiar with each other because I was . . . I did not adapt very well to the environment because I was expecting one kind of behavior, but I got the behavior that I was used to down in the South. It was rumble, rumble, rumble.

Zaragoza: When I was there in graduate school my second year, there was a young brother who got

jumped and beat down on Greek Row. He had his leg broke. Essentially a white mob—four or five of these Greek fraternity members—beat him down. We had started a little newspaper and we reported on that.

Then the year that I left, a Native brother had a very similar incident happen, where he was ganged up on by a mob of whites. His name is David Warner, and he still hasn't recovered from the mob violence that hit him at WSU.

Thomas: Yeah. When were you at WSU?

Zaragoza: I was there '98 to 2004.

Thomas: Anthony, it was . . . it was negative going through it, but in hindsight, it was a positive experience, because I met Dr. Johnnetta Cole. She became my mentor. She helped me to understand systems—how they operate, the politics involved in systems, particularly in higher education. At that time, Rudy Martin was there. Willie Parson was there. They were all graduate students. The little community that we had was tight. We partied together, we struggled together.

I was very fortunate to be involved in learning how to develop coalitions. I was there when the invasion of Cambodia, and we closed the school down for a semester. It was just a lot of good things going on. As Brother John Lewis would say, "There's a lot of good trouble going on." A lot of alliance building, coalitions. We brought the administration to the table and negotiated. You recall United Farm Workers movement was growing at that time, and there was a whole issue around scab labor and grapes.

Zaragoza: Yeah, that was the time of the first grape boycott, isn't it?

Thomas: Exactly, and lettuce. What we were able to do based upon our alliances and our coalition building—Glenn Terrell was the President then, and the food service said that the only lettuce they would buy would be lettuce that had the Azteca eagle on it, the UFW. It was a very exciting time. It was a struggle to get through it, but it helped broaden my worldview and gave me the opportunity to look at possibilities—coalition building, allies. At that time, you recall the Black Panther Party was emerging, and after football season, I spent most of the time in Seattle. I'd come back and take my tests and stuff.

Zaragoza: Did you know the Dixon brothers back then?

Thomas: Yeah.

Zaragoza: Was that who you were working with?

Thomas: Aaron and Elmer? Yeah, yeah. I knew Elmer a little bit better than Aaron. Aaron was a little bit older. Aaron was spending a lot of time between Seattle and Oakland. Yeah, I know Elmer, and Larry Gossett, Ron Simms. There was a brother named E. J. Brisker. Charles Mitchell, but he was moving

toward his profession then. Then there was another brother named Eddie Rye.

Zaragoza: That's not a name I know.

Thomas: If you get a chance—and Gilda should know Eddie Rye. If you get a chance, he's a good person to talk to about the history of the movement in Seattle. It would be helpful for people to know that there were strong coalitions that were developed back during those times, and those coalitions and alliances really had a lot to do with pushing issues around multicultural education to the table. It was a very exciting time.

When I graduated from Washington State, I followed Dr. Johnnetta Cole back to the University of Massachusetts. I studied and got my master's there. Then I came back. In all of that time, I had a family. I got married before I left Washington. I had a pregnant wife and two puppies when I left and went to Massachusetts. I was Johnnetta's research assistant and teaching assistant for a year and a half.

Then I worked in a community residential youth center, which in Massachusetts, they decentralized all the juvenile homes and created residential youth centers throughout the state. I lived in Springfield, Massachusetts. My wife and I were the head residents of this residential youth center, so I did a lot of advocacy for young brothers in the courts, and did family intervention, helping young brothers get back into their families. I ended up majoring in sociology. I was interested in sociological theory, but I always had an interest in working with young brothers that were being victimized by the juvenile justice system.

When I finished my coursework, it was time to leave. Massachusetts was all right, but I wanted to be either back in Texas or back in the state of Washington. I was offered a position at Central Washington State—College then, now University—as a recruiter, an advisor, and an instructor in the Educational Opportunities program, which was a program designed to recruit under-represented students from under-represented communities to the college. I was a lecturer/instructor in the Sociology Department and developed an Upward Bound program. I wrote a grant and developed an Upward Bound program.

Evergreen was opening up in '71, so when I got back to Washington, it was '72. In '74-'75, a good friend of mine and a brother at Washington State was going to Evergreen. We were at Washington State struggling together and he and his wife left—they dropped out of Washington State—and went and worked with the United Farm Workers for almost two years. Then he came back and went to Evergreen and finished his degree at Evergreen, a brother named Tomás Ybarra. He is now the Vice President at Yakima Valley College.

He asked if I would come over and talk with the group. The group meaning at Evergreen, they

were the first generation of students of color were dealing with Evergreen and dealing with what were inequities. They were brought there, or they came there, and they felt isolated. They felt like the curriculum did not respect them. There was no cultural support, etc.

This was in the process of when the institution was looking at what they called the non-white DTF. The non-white DTF was to look at how The Evergreen State College would respond to the lack of inclusion at Evergreen. I went over and talked with brothers there— Tomás Ybarra, April West, Robin West, Maria Gonzalez. It was all students of color. At that time, I had a little understanding about administration and how you work it.

Zaragoza: Thanks to all your conversations with the Dean at WSU?

Thomas: Definitely. Definitely. We used to call him—rest his soul—“Tuna” Terrell, Glenn “Tuna” Terrell. Dr. Terrell was from Kentucky, but he was cool. He was all right. He knew how to work with the Board of Trustees. He was a fundraiser.

I talked with the brothers and sisters. We had an interesting discussion about—because I asked the question, “Why do they call us ‘non-white?’” Non-white means like a nonentity.” “Yeah, we know that.” We were jamming and jamming and jamming. At that time, you recall—Brother Anthony, this was like 1974-75. The concept of the Third World was big then. When we were at Washington State, that’s what we’d say, we were the Third World student organization. I said, “What about Third World?” “Yeah, yeah, yeah!”

People of color and Indigenous brothers and sisters say, “Yeah, that’s fine. We’ll be people of color, but we’ve got a different kind of relationship with America. We’re sovereign, so we’ll be down with you all, but we negotiate at a higher level.” I said, “Go.”

That was in the spring, and then the next spring, The Evergreen State College had created out of the negotiations with the students of color the office of the Third World Coalition office. They called and asked, “Hey, would you come over? Do you want to do this?” I said, “Well, you know, it sounds interesting. I’ll fly.” I was appointed the first Director of the Third World Coalition. In ’75-’76 I left Central Washington State College and came to Evergreen.

Zaragoza: What were your first impressions and early experiences at Evergreen after you arrived?

Thomas: When I had the opportunity to work with the students and talk about ways in which you could work with administration, I had the opportunity to look at the campus and talk with people—Rudy, Willie was there. Craig Carlson was a faculty member there and was an ally, a white brother. There was an Anglo sister there named Susie Strasser.

Rudy knew them, so when I was there, Rudy invited me over and we had some drinks and they

were there, and I was listening to them. I was thinking, you know, this sounds like a pretty interesting place. It had its struggles, but it wasn't like Central Washington State College, where everything was locked in. You've been to Ellensburg, so you know what I'm talking about.

I got to Ellensburg from Massachusetts. The first day I got there, I was driving around in my little old beat-up, and next thing I know, a big old horse was right next to me, and I said, "Whoa!" They said, "The rodeo is getting ready to start!" And people were all—I said, "Oh, man, what the hell did I do?" [laughing] I had heard about the rodeo but I thought it was just—man, Ellensburg is the rodeo capital of the State of Washington. I said, "Ah, okay, cool."

But in listening to the conversation with Rudy and Craig and Susie—and there were some other people there—I said, "You know, that sounds pretty interesting." I was thinking about applying for a faculty position because I wanted to be in the classroom, but it turned out I started in the administrative track.

My first impression was, huh, this is a place that has some good potential because it doesn't have all of these artificial structures, all of this bureaucracy. Though there was struggle, there was language that was coming out of the institution about the willingness to struggle around issues of social justice and stuff, whereas in other institutions, that kind of language was not there. So, between the language and the pedagogy, the way that the curriculum was designed and delivered—Evergreen at that time had really talked a lot about being student centered. Students would be involved in developing programs, they'd be involved in evaluating teachers. Everything was like 180 degrees from all these schools that I went to as an undergrad and graduate school and it was very appealing.

My first impression was there's a whole lot of students here that look like the students I went to school with, and the hallways smell like what I'm used to smelling, so I was impressed. I was impressed with what was being said and the opportunity to do something different.

Zaragoza: I wanted to hear more about those early days at Evergreen when you start working there.

Thomas: Evergreen at that time, the organizational culture was different. It was very fluid. There wasn't a lot of formality in terms of addressing people. It was, "Hi, Anthony." "How are you doing, Charles?" Charles McCann was the President. Open-door policy. [chuckles] At that time, people smoked on campus. After 5:00 you'd go to the President's Office and sit down and have a glass of wine and talk about what's going on.

I came in as a Director—as I said, I was the first Director—so it was open season for me in a sense because I could in fact develop what the director was all about. Because they had this laundry list of things, everything from curriculum review to student discipline. I'm saying, whoa. I had to look at,

listen to, and prioritize what in fact was going to be doable for me in an environment that said, “C’mon in and help us do this, this, this, this and this.”

My experience with curriculum review was I was reading all these programs and trying to give feedback on particularly the social science and history. I went to the deans’ meetings. At that time, meetings were open. You want to come to a deans’ meeting, that’s fine. It was fluid. If you’re a faculty person and you didn’t mind dealing with administrative stuff, come on to the deans’ meeting.

I was there, and Anthony, it was a course that was dealing with French literature and history, something like that. I was reading and I said, “Oh, wow! It would be interesting to infuse under this theme the impact that France had on colonizing.” I was particularly interested in Algiers because I spent a lot of time reading Frantz Fanon and studying Fanon.

Man, people looked at me like [laughing] “Who the hell are you to tell us what to do with the curriculum? Do you teach here?” Hey, it was on. It was on like *Donkey Kong*. I said, “Hey, I don’t teach here but I was hired here as a Director, and your deans asked me to look at the curriculum, and I’m just giving you feedback.” What I surmised from that was, hell, if you ain’t faculty here, don’t be messing around with the curriculum. What you can do is support the curriculum, and support it in terms of advising, helping students develop their programs.

That first couple of years, with the flexibility in the institution, I was able to really focus in on what the Coalition was supposed to be about. The reality was the laundry list of things would neuter the focus that the Coalition needed to have to be supportive of students or people of color in the learning community, and to try to have some semblance of some connection back to the communities where these young brothers and sisters came from.

Olympia now is more diverse than it was in 1975. Lacey was just Prairie Ridge. There wasn’t that many people out there, so the connection was between Olympia and Tacoma and the Nation that Indigenous people came from. Indigenous students always had a little bit more contact because they were from Nisqually, Quinault, etc. African students and Mexicanos had a little challenge because they were coming from California. Brothers and sisters that came from Seattle had connection, but a lot of the first generation of students, they really—with the exception of the Indigenous people—lived on campus, so they would go home on the weekend and stuff like that, but most of it was concentrated right there.

What was it like? It was dynamic because it was young. I got there in ’76. The doors opened up in ’71, so it was still in its infant stage. A lot of good debate, open, straight up, in your face discussions. A lot of experimentation, trying to figure out, how can Evergreen—this was a question way back then—

be student centered and deliver the kind of rigor that's necessary for an undergrad liberal arts degree? That was a struggle back then.

What role does a student really play in developing programs? How do you get students involved? These are the questions that were dealt with. How do you develop a curriculum that helps a student actualize their academic interests from day one until they graduate? Where do you put students? There were some students that came that were pretty advanced, but at that time, it was everybody starts out in coordinated studies. Well, what if a student is more advanced? They're advanced, but they're not advanced in interdisciplinary studies. Those were the kind of questions that were going on.

Governance issues were there. Struggle with the concept of shared governance. How do you develop a collaborative decision-making process? How do you develop consensus within a learning community that has different echelons and different categories? How do you develop what was called DTFs, so that they would be representative? You know people of color, there wasn't but a few of us, so we was on everything. [laughing] At that time I asked if I was going to get hazardous duty pay because I was on so many DTFs. [laughing]

What should be the content of the curriculum? How do you develop the curriculum in such a way that there's theory and practice? How do you get students involved in communities and deal with social change? When is enough enough? When is too much? Because the Legislature were cool about an alternative college, but they weren't too cool about the activism that was coming out of the college.

The faculty was supportive of it. That was the mission of the college to engage people in the real world. How do you do that, and balance the State image? The State is paying for the college, and at the same time, you're out here talking about polluted water. [laughing] What's the town and gown relationship? How do you deal with that? How do you deal with the fact that when I got there, there was a foreclosure bill coming up in the next biennium? How do you do all of that?

Zaragoza: Stone, you were talking about your work with the Third World Coalition. I wonder two things. One, you mentioned that you had narrowed down the objectives of the Coalition, and I'm wondering what were the strategic objectives that you narrowed it down to, given what your assessment of the conditions and what was possible? Also, would you say that the Third World Coalition is essentially the forebearer, the precursor of First Peoples?

Thomas: Yeah. Given what Evergreen was all about, what I knew that the Coalition was not going to be about was to be the Office of Minority Affairs. I knew that because I had experience in looking at Washington State University and University of Washington that had Offices of Minority Affairs, but they

were isolated. I believe that it was important for the Third World Coalition to have administrative oversight in areas like faculty hiring—all hiring for that matter. It would serve as a catalyst for change where necessary and based upon what the so-called non-white DTF had identified as being tangibles or outcomes. Also, how do you enhance the quality of life for students in and out of the classroom?

Those were the three areas. In that administrative piece, how do we look at development that was inclusive? Because early on, like in any organization, people who felt comfortable being with each other, those were the people—sometimes there wasn't a lot of inclusion around the whole notion of planning, either academic programs or how you interface with student support so that people would be—because at that time, student development was your tradition—Admissions, Financial Aid, Registrar's office. They had a Health Center and had Counseling.

But what listening to and working with Admissions office—it used to be, Brother Anthony, for you to get admitted into the college, you had to write. You had to write a letter about how Evergreen State College da-da-da. What they were finding was that there was a lack of congruency between what people wrote and their writing skills when they got to Evergreen.

Listening to faculty, listening to students, we said, “Hey, there needs to be some kind of support for students so that they can develop their writing skills to the college-level expectations. We put together Center for the Development of Reading and Writing. At that time, it was just called C-RAW, the Center for Reading and Writing.

Early on, Evergreen was venturing with Writing Across the Curriculum. Math Across the Curriculum. There were some people who came that the last time they did math was algebra or basic arithmetic, so we put together a math lab. Eventually, the Third World Coalition—what I observed and the feedback I was getting from people—was too mono-focused because there were a lot of intersecting things that needed to happen for students to be successful there. There was a lot of intersecting things that were happening on the academic side of the house that needed attention, and the community as a whole, being isolated in Olympia, there needed to be some mechanism by which collegiality exists within the people of color community and developing alliances with the general community.

I was only the Director of the Coalition for three years. Then what we did—so that we could institutionalize things—I advocated for and we were successful in developing what we called the Office of Educational Support Programs, under which the Coalition was still a part of, but we institutionalized other supports, like the Center for Reading and Writing, the math lab, and we developed an outreach component through grants from TRIO. We wrote TRIO grants.

All of those were together as an organizational entity to look at student success, coalition

building and alliance around issues that had to do with governance, hiring, etc. We expanded the Coalition—or the concept of learning community support—to include these other entities. The whole intent was to institutionalize everything so that it became not an Office of Minority Affairs, but it became a part of the institution. That was the whole thing.

I spent a lot of time over there in those dorms listening to young brothers and sisters talk about their experience. Did a lot of discussion with faculty in terms of what they were experiencing in the classroom. I was fortunate. I reported to the Provost, so I was on the academic administrative team, so I had the opportunity to listen to, conceive and actualize programs that would be helpful for the students and for faculty.

You're faculty. You know when you've got all these multiple lenses in the classroom, and at that time, there wasn't a lot of students of color so students could get isolated in a classroom. When their lens leads them to believe that someone is racist, and the person is not really racist, they just didn't cover the materials because they'd never been exposed to the materials. How do you do that?

I tried, we tried, to impact faculty training. People were open at that time. I remember out of all the faculty I worked with, I can name you—and I won't—four of five faculty out of 100-plus that were just pushback. Everything was pushback. Most of it was "Hey, Stone, you got any information on da-da-da-da-da?" "No, I don't, but I've got this person, I knew this person." So, there was lot of networking going on. A lot of collaborative knowledge construction going on.

At the same time, the students, though they struggled, they made marked improvements in things like student government. We're talking about not a lot of pushback—some pushback—but the environment at that time, the culture at that time, was open to serious, authentic debate. For example, all the S&A [Services and Activities] money—there was a whole lot of it—was not being distributed equitably. We got together and talked to students about, how do you make a presentation? How do you convince somebody? Students of color, and at that time it was the Gay and Lesbian Center. Let me put it this way. You know where Jennifer's office was?

Zaragoza: Provost Drake? Yeah.

Thomas: Yeah. If you move over there, you remember where Wendy's office is?

Zaragoza: Yeah.

Thomas: They reconfigured it, but that was where my office was, and all the student organizations were down the same hall, so there was a lot of cross-fertilization. Students had potlucks to strategize. What happened was the S&A money, students made the argument that there should be categories for funding—human rights category, ecology, all the ones that they had. That created dollars for students to do

things.

When Tacoma came in, Tacoma said, “Hey, look, our students pay into S&A and we’re not getting any money.” “Okay, what’s the proposal?” “We propose that with the exception of the community funds—computers, whatever—that we get per head what we put into the pot.” “Cool.”

That kind of synergy was going on. Struggle? Yeah, there was struggle. Ideology was recognized, but it never isolated people. As a matter of fact, the ideological differences that occurred brought people into giant forums and discussions. On Wednesdays, the Rotunda would be, hell, you think it would be spinning around because there would be so much stuff going on, so many debates going on.

Gender identity, those were issues back then, too. You had a cadre of young brothers and sisters from the gay community that said that their struggle was more predominant and should be more predominant than people of color’s struggle. [Growls] But through it all, there were consensus that were made or developed, and where consensus could not exist, people just agreed to disagree.

Zaragoza: We’re talking still your first stint at Evergreen. I want to be sure I got this right. You were the founding Director of the Third World Coalition, which is the precursor to First Peoples multicultural advising.

Thomas: Right.

Zaragoza: You were a founding grant writer for the TRIO programs.

Thomas: Yes, sir.

Zaragoza: We just had that grant renewed, thanks to the efforts of your legacy.

Thomas: Oh, wow. Good.

Zaragoza: And you were educating faculty about how they needed to think about their curriculum a little bit more broadly.

Thomas: Right.

Zaragoza: Are there some other key highlights for you during this first stint at Evergreen?

Thomas: I think we were effective in looking at—this came through Upward Bound. We had a student service grant, too. We were able to really enhance the whole notion of student success, particularly in the areas of coordinated studies, because that’s where most of the students were coming into. I’d say 90 percent of the faculty agreed to what now is called the “early alert system.” If students were having a hard time, we would educate faculty as to what were the resources that were available to help them in their classroom.

For example, early on in coordinated studies, students had to write autobiographies. Well, if you

really get into it—a lot of the students got into it—they were disclosing stuff that would bring up traumatic experiences in their lives. Early on, faculty said, “I can’t deal with alcoholism. I can’t deal with drugs.”

“You don’t have to. We want to support you.” We broadened the scope of counseling. We were able to broaden the scope of counseling because we got some dollars from the feds. Because at that time, the State of Washington wasn’t offering a whole lot of money, particularly for student services or student development. Instruction? Yeah. Student development? No.

I think we did a good job in echoing the importance of serving the whole student. We had some masterful people who had content knowledge and pedagogy, but not having experienced some of the things the students were experiencing—or being trained in that—was kind of tough. That collaboration, I felt real good. I felt we made some headway in student success.

Zaragoza: That’s very, very important, and we’re still trying to work through some of the issues. Because one of the main levers is that budgetary lever that you talked about.

Thomas: Mm-hm.

Zaragoza: If there’s consciousness at the institution and a recognition that the whole student needs to be in the room as part of the education but there aren’t the dollars to make that happen, and the people in place to ensure that it does, and to facilitate it, then it becomes overwork on everybody involved. The austerity cuts of the last 20 years have, I think, erased a lot of the progress that you all were so successful in making.

Thomas: Brother Anthony, given the uniqueness of Evergreen to have a comprehensive, holistic approach to student successes is the prerequisite to the kind of success that Evergreen would—because it is unique. My observation over time is even more so now because the demographics of Evergreen has changed. Evergreen has more first-generation students than they did before. They have more students on financial aid. They have more students that come out of the public school system, on and on and on.

So, that kind of orientation—I don’t know if Evergreen still requires new incoming students to go through coordinated studies. But that requirement helped a whole lot of students transition to the learning environment.

Zaragoza: Stone, we’re approaching 6:00 your time. You leave Evergreen when? Around ’78-’79?

Thomas: I left Evergreen in ’90.

Zaragoza: You said you were in a position of Third World Coalition Director for three years. In what role did you stay on from the end of that position until 1990?

Thomas: Okay, I didn’t complete it. I was the Third World Coalition Director and I was the Dean of

Student Development.

Zaragoza: You were the Director of the Third World Coalition and then the Director of what?

Thomas: Educational Support Programs, ESP.

Zaragoza: Then you move on to become the Dean of—

Thomas: When Olander came, I became a dean. I became a dean in 1984. I was the Dean of Student Development and I had all of what we described earlier, and I had Career Advising, and I had an active role in enrollment management. I left Evergreen as a dean.

Zaragoza: Where do you go after that, Stone?

Thomas: I went to Brookhaven College in Farmers Branch, Texas. I made a decision, Brother Anthony, to move from four-year institutions to the community college. I'll tell you why. Community colleges were much more fluid in serving communities. The kind of dynamics that occurs in a community college is totally different from four-year institutions. I wanted to be where the community was and be actively involved in the issues of access and success at the community college level.

The beauty of Evergreen for me was it was small enough, Brother Anthony, where I got exposed. Every level I went through, I got exposed to a broader scope of what the institution was about. When I was the dean, I got involved in and exposed to facilities management. We redesigned the Student Union Building so that it would be more student centered. We put all those offices up there, so I worked with facilities. Each level, I was exposed to more administrative kinds of functions, so I was able to move into a Vice President position when I went to the community college system.

When I went to the community college system, I took Evergreen with me. Because in the community college system, we developed learning communities within the curriculum. As a matter of fact, the connection that got me to the Dallas Community College System was through a President by the name of Patsy Fulton. She sent some of her faculty up to Evergreen to learn about learning communities. When I got to Brookhaven, we brought in Barbara Smith and Jean MacGregor and she trained some of the faculty in learning communities. We had two learning communities, one that was in the social sciences and one that was in the sciences and art.

When I became a President, we did learning communities. We had learning communities for social sciences, but we had a great deal of success, Brother Tony, in having learning communities that were designed to deal with developmental education—math and reading, and reading and writing, those two. What we know is that if you have a hard time reading, you have a hard time in math, so we coupled those two. If you don't read well, you're not going to write well.

Zaragoza: Stone, I asked about that because I'm wondering if we might be able to come back on Friday

and get some stories for the '80s, because we're just leaving the '70s and I'm wondering if we might talk a little bit more on Friday. Does this time from 2:00 to 4:00 work for you, or 4:00 to 6:00 your time?

Thomas: On Friday, 3:00 would be better for me.

Zaragoza: You want us to do 3:00 your time?

Thomas: Yes, and you want me to think about the '80s? You want me to think about the transition period.

Zaragoza: Yes. The dark heart of neoliberalism.

Thomas: That's when Dan Evans and Joe Olander, those were interesting times.

Zaragoza: Let's try to capture those to the extent that we can on Friday.

Thomas: That would be fine. You got the first round, from '75 up to '80. Okay, I'll think about that. See if I've got anything in my archives that would tickle my memory. If you got specific questions, help me with that, too.

Zaragoza: I will. I will consider specific questions. Thank you. Thank you for being with me today. I really appreciate all the knowledge you dropped today.

Thomas: It's been my pleasure. It's kind of nice walking down memory lane.

Zaragoza: We'll do it again Friday.