

Theresa

Seeing the first black president was not a shock to me. It just seemed like it's the natural flow of things. Because we should be beyond the color of the skin. I mean, that's how I was raised.



I'm a community person. I believe in helping others. And everything I do is in that direction, as much as I can. Except for my art. That's mainly for me, and I realize that.

I was never told I couldn't be an artist. In fact, when I was eight my grandfather gave me a set of oil paints. I remember standing in my grandmother's dining room, on her lace tablecloth, painting. I don't know if I ever got paint on the tablecloth or not.

There is one drawing that I did when I was in the fourth grade, and it shows a little girl walking through a community, and an American flag. The title of the picture was "The Land of the Free." And when I look at that now I think I only saw freedom for that particular person. There's nobody else around, and she was White. Even though it had never been discussed with me, never mentioned in my family, and it wasn't a topic of discussion, my question was "Who is really free?"

I lived in an all-Black community. We had everything there. I had family, I had friends, so ... We just went about life. But in the back of my mind, I could see that dichotomy, you know? What's really going on. When I go back and look at those drawings, it's exactly what I was feeling, what I was going through, without me thinking about it.

And then I went to an integrated high school, and

I couldn't participate fully in the activities because I was Black. And I even had the counselor say to me, "Well, you're not going to college, you're not college material." And that assumption was applied to me without knowing my background. She had no idea I'd be the third generation in my family to go to college. I felt like I was just grouped in a group.

Racism has always been here - the groupings and the assumptions. And it's still here. You know, my name isn't one most people associate with being African American. If they hear me talk on the phone, they may not pick up on it. So, when I walk into a room for the first time, I can see that "Oh," you know, reaction. Other times I will get the question, "What are you?" or "Where do you come from?" I say, "West Virginia." I know what they're asking me, but I leave it at that.

In my family, our complexion covers the full range. My step-father was so fair that if he went out to mow the lawn, he'd blister. In fact, I just found out as an adult that my Uncle Ernie was White, and my son grew up not knowing that his Aunt Vicky was Black, or his Aunt Jenny was White.

I've also had people say, "Well, you couldn't be Black, because you don't look it, you don't talk that way." What does that mean? One day a group of us



“Integration.”
Colored pencil on
paper. Drawing
by Theresa, circa
1992.



“That's another drawing I did — all the kids on one side of the room ... and I'm sitting over here by myself ... When I go back and look at those drawings, it's exactly what I was feeling, what I was going through as a child.”

were sitting at the table and my mother said, “I am so tired of people asking me where I’m from, or what I am.” And we all said the same thing. “We are, too.” And my brother said, “Well, maybe we aren’t Black.”

I did a piece of artwork last week and on one side I have another drawing I did when I was in the 4th grade, and then on the other side I have images of what’s going on today – Police brutality, lynchings, whether they’re physical or psychological. And then I’m standing there pledging allegiance. During the pledge of allegiance, I always had this question in the back of my mind, “I don’t fit in, so, why am I pledging allegiance?” You know?

You have to be positive in life, or it’s overwhelming. But there are times when I’m down, and I’ve learned to accept that, too. Not to push it aside, but to go ahead and let myself feel it. And then, usually, I use my art to get through it. I know who I am by what comes out in my art.

It’s breast cancer that brought me back to my art. Because at the time I was busy being a teacher and a mommy and community organizing, just all kinds of stuff. And once I was diagnosed I had to stop and say,

“...I cannot leave this earth until I finish my artwork.”

“Okay, what’s really, really important?” First thing was my son. Second thing was my art. Cause I said, “Oh no. I cannot leave this earth until I finish my artwork.”

In every situation you learn something. Go ahead and deal with what you thought you should have done or didn’t do. But look for the silver lining. Look for what you learned.