

[00:00:02.510] - Courtney Thompson

I am Courtney Thompson, and I am here with Iris Matthews to talk about your life growing up in Sewanee as part of the Sewanee Black History Initiative. Thank you so much, Ms. Iris, for sharing your stories with us today. Today is May the 27th, 2019. So let's begin at the beginning. Can you please tell us your full name and when and where you were born?

[00:00:34.310] - Iris Matthews

Iris Renee Winton Matthews. I was born June 10, 1954, in Sewanee, Tennessee. So I guess I've been here all my life, up until the age of 13, when I went to Winchester to finish high school. But growing up in Sewanee, to me, I liked it. It was where I got to be a Girl Scout, a cadet Scout. We got to do the cookies, the United Negro College Fund, and the UNICEF. All these things we got to learn right here in Sewanee. In Sewanee, as a young student, I was tutored by several of our students right here on University campus, and I remember their names. Tom- Thomas Campbell was one of them. He was a student here. Argent Saginati, do not ask me how to spell it, but I think he was from India. And Jeff Walker, who came back here to finish the theology school. And also Eric Benjamin. These students started the Boys and Girls Club, which is now I think the senior citizens place 'cause I don't think there's very many young people still here. So they started the Boys and Girls Club. So we'd have a place to go. And of course, through Tom and a couple of others, I got hired as someone to answer the phones in the office. Have I answered the phones in the office? No. But they wanted to give us the opportunity to know what it feels like to work in an office, what to do. They even had me typing. And I hadn't had typing at the time. But those things stuck with me about working. And most of the time when I had a job, even after I left Sewanee, I was the only African American working in that place during that time. And that went on for probably about up until the time I went back to College. I finished College at Middle Tennessee State University in 1983. And I also spent two years in Pulasky, Tennessee, two years there at Martin Methodist College. So I kind of been around. But Sewanee was to me, awesome. I babysitted, my first job before the Boys and Girls Club, was babysitting for the school of Theology. When they went out to their events, I got to watch a color TV, and I had black and white in my house. The kids were asleep. You had the house to you self and all the snacks that I had never seen before in my house. It was wonderful. And they paid me. So these are things that I remember about Sewanee. Sewanee, to me, was awesome.

[00:03:12.710] - Courtney Thompson

Can you tell me about your family? What was the makeup of your family? A bit about your parents, siblings, if you had them, and then maybe your sense of what their experiences were like in Sewanee.

[00:03:27.650] - Iris Matthews

I really can't speak for their experience. My father's name is Willie H. Winton. He worked for the athletic Department at the University. He worked under Coach Iani Majors, the father not the son. My mother worked, her name is Estella Winton Bailey, she worked at the hospital, and then later on, she worked at Gailor Hall, which my understanding is not Gailor Hall anymore. It's offices. Gailor Hall used to be the mess hall for the students.

[00:03:56.390] - Courtney Thompson

Oh right, correct.

[00:04:01.950] - Iris Matthews

Six of us altogether, one brother and four other sisters. And we all grew up here in Sewanee and, of course, went to high school in Winchester, Tennessee. But wished I could've went to high school in Sewanee, but I didn't know that we could, but I found a later we actually really could have: the Sewanee and Military Academy, and St. Andrews was accepting, giving grants for those who wanted to go. Didn't know that.

[00:04:28.110] - Courtney Thompson

Why do you think you didn't know, though? Was it because- why do you think you didn't know?

[00:04:34.350] - Iris Matthews

I don't think it was probably one of those, another well kept secret. They didn't want everybody to go.

Maybe they didn't want a lot of black kids to go. But my mother said she didn't know about it, but another friend of mine went to SMA and another friend went to St. Andrews, and I was like, I would have loved to have gone to high school in Sewanee, but didn't. But I would love to. But I think it's probably just one of those things where they didn't want everybody to know. But I'm not sure.

[00:05:03.270] - Courtney Thompson

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about some of the things that you remember about the Sewanee growing up? I mean, you talked early on about being a part of Girl Scouts and being involved in the Boys and Girls club? Are there other things that come to mind when you think about your childhood in Sewanee, so experiences that you had, lessons that you learned that maybe you took with you.

[00:05:33.270] - Iris Matthews

I never had any bad experiences in Sewanee. One of the main things is we had strict parents and we may have straight away been doin' nothing stupid for a second or two but didn't last long. My parents was very strict. I was normally pretty much close friends with many of the students, even though I was probably 13, you don't think about it at the time them being 19 or 20, but I knew a lot of the students and I can even visit them at there's one called the Red Door, and I think it was a dormitory we used to visit there, but they never tried to do anything crazy or stupid. There used to be a little what I would call now nightclub, but it was like a little coffee house, I guess. I can't remember what they called it, but the students would go down there and a lot of times a lot of us would be in there and we were probably too young to be in there. But I looked older than what I was. So I guess they thought I was a student and it was okay. But nothing ever really happened bad. I remember having to go to. We could go to the Student Union for the movies. That was the Student Union, but they didn't care if we came in and watched the movie, too. I think the movies were a quarter. I can't remember, but- I remember one bad thing. It wasn't bad, but I didn't know it was bad. We were selling Girl Scout cookies and we went to the white area. White area, black area, to us it was all the same at the time and she said, Well, come around the back, I want some cookies. I never didn't know why she said, come around the back. Of course, as I got older, I know why she said, come around the back, because we were black, which didn't sit well with me. But I didn't remember that till I got older. But no, we would go out Christmas caroling, to every houses, the different houses would have hot cocoa and Apple cider for all the carolers. People don't do that anymore.

[00:07:28.350] - Courtney Thompson

Right things have changed. Are there other things that- I'm always kind of interested in the ability to reflect and look back at experiences. And so are there other things that you feel have changed about Sewanee since you were a child?

[00:07:45.730] - Iris Matthews

I don't think Sewanee has changed much. I think Sewanee needs to change as I've gotten older, like we were talking about earlier, I don't think they've diversified enough inside of the University. As I was growing up, I got to see them go from all white, males. Then I saw them go diversify to males, blacks, white, anybody. And then before I left one, I also saw co-ed girls. So the school was fully everybody. But as far as staff, from what I could see or heard or talk to people about, there's not a whole lot of change in the staff and nobody can give me statistics on this, but from what I can see, it maybe looked 2% black. I don't know how many professors you have, but I do know Eric Benjamin from being a student here. I found him at the University and talked to him for a few minutes and he still remembers some of the same people, I remember, too. But other than Eric, I didn't see too many other people. So to me, I still think they need to diversify in that area too.

[00:08:55.630] - Courtney Thompson

Thank you. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how growing up in Sewanee, living here for the time that you spent has shaped or informed your perspectives, or has it at all?

[00:09:12.490] - Iris Matthews

I think it has, I think the students gave me a perspective to look at something different or be something different. I got to see more- I mean, not only were you have messages from Dr. King, which always wanted us to stand up and do what we could. But for those students, they went out of their

way to do things, to make us feel like we were important. And so when I left Sewanee and was finishing high school and going to College, I always, no matter what job I went to apply for, I was good enough for that job. I was always good enough for that job, even though it wasn't looking like that, from what you could see. But from the students that taught me, they made me feel like I was worth something. And that's the way everything should be all the time.

[00:10:06.010] - Courtney Thompson

So these were the students who were tutoring you, the students you mentioned in the very beginning, who you still remember?

[00:10:12.010] - Iris Matthews

Yes, I still remember, because Jeff Walker may be still here. I know Eric knows Jeff Walker. Thomas Campbell. I don't know where Thomas Campbell is now, but Mary Priestley Patton still remembers David Neely, he is either David Neely or David Neal. He was a concert pianist. He was wanting to teach me a piano, and I went one time, and he was so nice. And because of some of the things people were saying, made me not go back to that class again, which I regret that to this day, I always wanted to learn piano. And he was teaching us- me for free. So, yes, many of the things these students did shaped how I feel about everything.

[00:10:51.130] - Courtney Thompson

Are there other experiences that were- I guess I'm thinking about this question in two ways. But the opportunity to take piano lessons, to take them for free. That was an opportunity that you had that you ultimately decided you weren't going to take advantage of. Are there other moments?

[00:11:17.430] - Iris Matthews

Well, no. I wanted to take advantage of it, but because of the stigma that they were, here's a young black girl being taught by a young white boy. What is she doing with him? Those type of things, those type of things we worried about as young people.

[00:11:31.950] - Courtney Thompson

So, like your reputation?

[00:11:33.210] - Iris Matthews

Yeah. Your reputation and everything. Exactly.

[00:11:37.530] - Courtney Thompson

Are there other things- Thank you for that clarification. Are there other things that you might have experienced in Sewanee, that for whatever reason, because of a stigma or because of something else you didn't take advantage of?

[00:11:52.830] - Iris Matthews

I think most of my- when I was going up, we didn't experience anything bad. And the other person, Smokey, Smokey Oats was his name smoky was. I'm not sure what Smokey was. Smokey was brown-skinned, but I don't know if he was- I think he was brought up a white family. I'm not sure because he lived right outside Nashville somewhere. But I didn't get to feel any bad things. They only made us feel really good. They made us feel like you're worth.-I mean, no matter what people are saying, there was a lot of things going on outside of Sewanee, which was going on out in the world with Dr. King, with them being arrested, with what was going on in Alabama, what was going on in Mississippi. We knew those things were happening, but Sewanee didn't seem to have- like I say there were some boys who was comin' from Tracy City. The students would run them out. "You're not going to talk to them like that. You're not going to do that here." We got to feel a sense of security with these students. I don't know if they're still like that, but these guys were great when I was coming up.

[00:12:59.730] - Courtney Thompson

Who helped you to make sense of what was happening in the world outside of Sewanee. So you mentioned kind of like the political piece, like the civil rights movement, social struggle, unrest.

[00:13:12.630] - Iris Matthews

Right, But that wasn't here. This was actually what the black people had to struggle against ourselves, that we had to make sense of ourselves more or less. And I had that to contend with. And then I had to contend with how I just grew up in Sewanee. But when I left Sewanee, I really got to see a lot of injustice from Winchester. And when I went to Martin Methodist College, I don't know if you know this, but Martin Methodist College, Pulasky, Tennessee, is home of the K- founded in the KKK Klu Klux Klan. I did not know that before I went there and I spent two years and I was like, okay, why am I here? But things like that, I got to see a lot of that off the mountain, but I didn't see it on the mountain. So when I left here, I think I was 13 and I went to finish in Winchester. And those are one of the things really became the unrest of everything that was going on in the world.

[00:14:08.850] - Courtney Thompson

That's interesting to think about the way in which there was one reality on the mountain, and it didn't really mirror, or it wasn't indicative of what was happening beyond the mountain.

[00:14:20.370] - Iris Matthews

It really didn't.

[00:14:21.450] - Courtney Thompson

And then thinking about how you would have to navigate, OK. This is kind of what I've lived and experienced, kind of growing up. But this is the world now.

[00:14:31.530] - Iris Matthews

Exactly. The real world was the hurtful world, Sewanee, to me, was the magical Kingdom where I didn't have to face any of that. But Sewanee still has a long way to go. I can see that when I visited the campus, and I always stopped by when I'm leaving. And when I come from Georgia, I always come to Sewanee, and I always look at the campus. I always stop at the campus, and it still looks the same.

[00:14:55.950] - Courtney Thompson

How does it make you feel-

[00:14:58.530] - Iris Matthews

They have not diversified enough in that area as opposed to 2019.

[00:15:06.810] - Courtney Thompson

So can you think about what kinds of things you would see on the campus? Like, what might you encounter that would make you feel like okay strides are really being made. So let's think about the last time that you were on campus and the things that were missing. Like, what were those things that if you had seen them in your mind, you would have said, you know what, this is changing.

[00:15:29.370] - Iris Matthews

I mean, even Middle Tennessee State University, this is where I finished College that had more of a diversity of people, people from Africa, black people, white people, Asian, Indian. I don't feel like I still see that in Sewanee. I see it all the time in Georgia, at different universities, but I still don't see it much in Sewanee. So I think that's what we need to work on, diversifying the administrative, not only the offices, departments and the students. Thank you. I think they're waiting on me [somebody outside].

[00:16:08.130] - Courtney Thompson

Okay, so let's go ahead and wrap up. We want to be respectful of the time. I think the last question that I have for you is of all of the things that you've learned you can think about from your parents, your mentors, tutors, teachers. What do you think is most valuable? And what would you like for perhaps the generations who are coming behind you to consider or to be able to keep in mind?

[00:16:36.390] - Iris Matthews

That is a hard question, because I don't think it's the tutors or any of that. I think it's the parents. Our parents were strict, didn't kill us, we thought they were strict. But it was like- when we see where the children acting today, I am so grateful that our parents are strict on us. I was so grateful for actually

wasn't abused- we were talking about discipline and the curfews and things of this and that nature. The students did their jobs when I was here. I don't know if they're still doing it, but as far as the children today, it's going to have to be the parents. The parents have to step back up to the plate. We do need to make sure all the kids who were like us, who didn't have as much, somebody else poured into us. Someone else poured into us all the time. And it happened to be a lot of these students. For me, it was a lot of these students. But as far as the children today, it's going to take parents being disciplined, strict. We didn't Rob people, murder people, kill people, rape. We didn't do any of that. But the generations now they think it's normal to be horrible like that.

[00:17:51.550] - Courtney Thompson

Yeah, there's definitely a new norm that is troubling.

[00:17:56.830] - Iris Matthews

I think the parents have to realize if you're going to have children, you have to sacrifice. My parents sacrificed a lot. I had to sacrifice for my children. I have two boys, divorced and had to keep going so they could still keep going. One is in the Navy and one is in the school of ballet. We can constantly show our children they can always do better. But that comes from us we cannot depend on, actually they can't depend on the students to do it. The students was a good support of pouring back into us. But it's our parents who really set the stage, even for me to be respectful to them.

[00:18:32.170] - Courtney Thompson

Thank you.

[00:18:33.130] - Iris Matthews

You are so welcome and thank you for your time.

[00:18:36.130] - Courtney Thompson

I appreciate your time, Ms. Iris. So we are going to go ahead and conclude the interview. We look forward to talking to you again. I hope so.

[00:18:44.890] - Iris Matthews

I hope so. Maybe I get to come back in June, I'm not sure. We always come back in August. That's our family reunion-