

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Thelma E. Smoot

Interviewed by Catherine Brenda Coates

July 1, 2026

at the U.S.C.T. Interpretive Center in Lexington Park

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50 minutes, 45 seconds

[also in attendance UCAC volunteers Nathaniel Lawrence, Alma Jordon,
Anna Moseley, Elisia Lewis, and Emily Lewis, and Ms. Smoot's mother
and daughter Thelma Flordell Holt and Tamica Ann Johnson]

Brenda Coates ([00:00](#)):

Good afternoon. My name is Brenda Coates. I'm a member of the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions, UCAC. Today is July 1st, 2026. We are at the US Colored Troop Interpreted Center in Lexington Park, Maryland. Today, I have other committee members with me.

([00:25](#)):

Would you introduce yourselves please?

Alma Jordon ([00:28](#)):

Alma Jordon.

Elisia Lewis ([00:29](#)):

Elisia Lewis.

Nathaniel Lawrence ([00:30](#)):

Nathaniel Lawrence.

Emily Lewis ([00:30](#)):

Emily Lewis.

Anna Moseley ([00:34](#)):

Anna Moseley.

Speaker 7 ([00:39](#)):

[inaudible 00:00:38].

(00:39):

It's my turn.

Brenda Coates (00:42):

And today, we are interviewing Thelma E. Smoot. Sorry.

(00:50):

Okay. To start off, tell me something about your people.

Thelma E. Smoot (00:56):

My people, my family, well, my mother is Thelma Flordell Holt, nee June, and my father is Charles Leonard Holt Jr. My father was born and raised in St. Mary's County, and my mother is actually from Manning, South Carolina. They met in school, and he used to pull her pigtales. They both went to an all colored school, Banneker. He fell in love with her then, but my mother wasn't ready for a relationship back in those days. So they eventually met again and married. I have a brother and a sister. My sister is the oldest, Mary Rosalie Holt, and Charles Leroy Holt.

(01:49):

My grandparents, my great-grandparents are Ida and Lloyd Countess. They were the joy of my life. My grandfather had slapstick humor. They were sharecroppers back in the day, tobacco sharecroppers, and he also had a big garden. He had hogs and chickens, and he had a prize-winning hog that he used to call Beloved, and he used to talk to Beloved, and he had roosters and chickens. When a rooster would come out and run after the hen, he used to mock them and talk like they were actually talking. My grandmother, great-grandmother Ida, was known for her holistic healing, and people would travel miles through the county. Back then, it was real rural, and Amish used to always come to see her too for her holistic healing remedies. Some people would come to see her just to talk to her because I think she was so spiritual, just being near her would heal your soul.

(03:04):

I also had my grandparents on my mother's side, Leroy and Mary June. Most of the people in the county know Leroy June because he used to sell produce, not produce really, fish, to rural areas. For people who didn't have transportation, he would go to their homes and sell fresh fish. He also used to carpool people to Washington, DC when a lot of people didn't have access to higher paying jobs in the county because a lot of employees wouldn't hire Black people. He would transport people back and forth to DC. Once they started working, he would tell them, "Now, you can afford a car. You buy your car and you start doing the same thing with your car. Start a carpool, get some people, Black people, our brothers and sisters, and get them jobs within DC so they can get higher paying jobs. Do the generational wealth thing for your families." Once he had a stroke, he could no longer work, but he still took families within the community back and forth to the grocery stores, to their doctor's appointments and so forth.

(04:24):

And my father was similar to him. My father was a plumber. He worked for Ace Plumbing Company, and he did a nine-to-five job. But when he would come home, he would sit down for dinner, and our phone would be ringing off the hook. Everyone needed plumbing things fixed. He was so talented. He would never charge anybody for anything. I used to always say, "Won't daddy just change the phone number? And then people couldn't reach him," but he was so giving and helping others out. The same with my mother. She always was a member of the Immaculate Conception Church Ladies Auxiliary, always

helping, helping everyone. I learned how to give based on them. They were strong, loving parents, and they were biblically-based households.

(05:18):

They gave us, me and my siblings, the foundation of giving back to the community and giving us strong faith. So I taught that to my children, Tamica Johnson and my son Brandon, who passed away 13 years ago this past April. They also gave back to the community. My daughter is a social worker within the public school systems here in St. Mary's County. She helps children cope with the mental issues and just the difficulties they're having dealing with social issues within the school, anger issues with bullying, and whatever other issues they might come across. So my family life as a young person was full of joy until I started school, because I was like the Ruby Bridges of St. Mary's County.

Brenda Coates (06:22):

You said your grandparents were from the county.

Thelma E. Smoot (06:26):

Right.

Brenda Coates (06:30):

Okay. And then your mother was from South Carolina?

Thelma E. Smoot (06:35):

Manning, South Carolina, and my grandfather Leroy June was from Manning, South Carolina originally, and they came up here looking for better work. My great-grandfather had cotton fields and loads of land, but my grandfather, Leroy June, wanted something different. He worked construction. He worked as a cook. He just wanted something different. He didn't want to be in the cotton fields. He didn't want to do that. He wanted something different for his family.

Brenda Coates (07:08):

Okay. So your parents met in school?

Thelma E. Smoot (07:10):

In school.

Brenda Coates (07:11):

But how many years later did... Because you said-

Thelma E. Smoot (07:15):

Well, mama, when she was young, she was about 18, I believe, when she got married. So they met... When she was able to go out and party, go out different places, she met him.

Brenda Coates (07:26):

So they moved up here when she was how old?

Thelma E. Smoot (07:29):

When she was young, probably like maybe 10 or something, when she was young.

Brenda Coates (07:36):

Okay. And you said your grandfather had a carpool?

Thelma E. Smoot (07:39):

Yes, mm-hmm.

Brenda Coates (07:42):

Did he have any idea of how many people he helped start-

Thelma E. Smoot (07:47):

No.

Brenda Coates (07:47):

... carpools after that?

Thelma E. Smoot (07:48):

He didn't really realize what he was doing. It was out of the nature of his good being that he was doing that. He didn't realize at the time that he was helping people. You know how some people just help and do what's right in their heart? They do what is Christ-like in their heart. They don't realize that they're actually doing things, that they are setting a standard, setting goodwill within the community. They're just doing what they know is something that's right to do. Even his daughter, Elaine June, when she started working in DC, she started carpools. Yeah. It's just helping someone get to the next level in life.

Brenda Coates (08:50):

Okay, Okay. You said your grandfather had a farm.

Thelma E. Smoot (08:54):

Yeah, my great grandfather.

Brenda Coates (08:55):

Okay. Did your parents have a farm?

Thelma E. Smoot (09:01):

Well, my-

Brenda Coates (09:02):

Did you live off the land? That's what I should say.

Thelma E. Smoot (09:05):

Well, first of all, my great-grandparents sharecrop. My uncles helped my great-grandparents sharecrop, but they had other jobs. So on the weekends and the afternoons, they would help them on their farm. And my father also had a gorgeous garden. He would plant everything, he had a green thumb, and he

would give vegetables to the neighbors and whoever need vegetables. He was always giving. He'd plant an abundance, so he can help others. He was really good with that. And sometimes when we were in a drought season like this and his vegetables wasn't growing and somebody else's vegetable was growing, I would always kind of tease them, "How come their vegetable is growing and yours is not?" He would say, "Because I'm not their color," or something like that jokingly.

Brenda Coates ([10:12](#)):

Okay. You said it was three of you, three siblings, another sister and a brother?

Thelma E. Smoot ([10:17](#)):

Right.

Brenda Coates ([10:18](#)):

Okay. Did the girls have to go out in the fields or do the... I shouldn't say go out in the fields because your father didn't really have it-

Thelma E. Smoot ([10:27](#)):

Well, we helped. Yeah, me and my brother helped with the sharecropping and my great-grandparents. My sister was severe asthmatic, so she really couldn't help much at all. I helped until my father said, "Get your butt up to the house." Because I would step on plants or break the sticks or whatever, so I can go sit on my grandmother's lap on purpose, because I was afraid of those green tobacco worms, and I was always afraid I was going to see a snake or something. He knew what I was doing.

Brenda Coates ([11:04](#)):

Okay. When you were growing up, did your parents or grandparents have to discipline you much?

Thelma E. Smoot ([11:14](#)):

Well, yeah. Sort of kind of, but not a whole lot. Yeah.

Brenda Coates ([11:19](#)):

Just the normal?

Thelma E. Smoot ([11:20](#)):

Yeah, just the normal thing.

Brenda Coates ([11:23](#)):

Okay. You said your sister was asthmatic.

Thelma E. Smoot ([11:27](#)):

Yeah.

Brenda Coates ([11:27](#)):

How was your health and the general health of the rest of your family?

Thelma E. Smoot ([11:32](#)):

It was good. I didn't start getting sick until later in life. I am asthmatic, but it didn't hit me until later in life, getting allergic to certain things. My brother had hay fever, but it really didn't bother him until later in life. Young, I was good.

Brenda Coates ([11:55](#)):

Did y'all have a family doctor?

Thelma E. Smoot ([11:59](#)):

No. Back then, no. I guess we had a family doctor back then, but we didn't go to the doctor much because we had Ida Countess, the holistic healer in the family.

Brenda Coates ([12:13](#)):

Okay. I forgot that you said that. Yes. Okay, so what kind of remedies did she...

Thelma E. Smoot ([12:23](#)):

For instance, we was playing baseball one time, and the ball hit me in my head, and I had a great big protruding knot. I was crying. I was young, crying like a baby, because I still was a little baby. She laid me on her bed, and she said, "Llyod, go out there in those woods by the spring and get me some feverfew leaves." She says, "They look like daisies, but they're not," and she said, "Just get the leaves and only a couple of leaves, because that's all you need for this child's head." I remember that. He came back, and she put the leaves in a warm cloth and she put it over my head, and I kind of instantly went to sleep. And by the time I got up, woke up, the knot was gone and my headache was gone. I was good to go.

([13:17](#)):

I wish I paid attention because I used to walk with her all the time through the woods. And she used to have this tobacco stick that granddaddy put a spear, like I guess when you spear tobacco. He attached it to the bottom of it. And she used to use that to ward off, I guess, if she saw a snake or whatever or scare whatever animal that would approach us. But we used to walk through the woods a lot, and it was so cool, and the spring water would feel gorgeous. It was like heaven.

Brenda Coates ([13:53](#)):

When y'all were walking through the woods, did she say, "This is so and so. It's good for this with whatever"?

Thelma E. Smoot ([14:00](#)):

She probably did, but I wouldn't pay her attention or anything. I wish I had listened to whatever she was doing. I never listened. I always was looking in her pocket for candy or something. Other than that... because I was still a child.

Brenda Coates ([14:16](#)):

Okay. Well, let me ask you this. With your children, did you try to be like your grandmother was to you with them?

Thelma E. Smoot ([14:32](#)):

Yes, especially with storytelling.

Brenda Coates ([14:37](#)):

Okay.

Thelma E. Smoot ([14:37](#)):

Yeah. When my parents would go to bingo at Waysons Corner, we would spend the night at my grandmother's house, and she was an exceptional storyteller. She couldn't read or write, but she would tell us Bible-based stories from Genesis. They didn't have electricity. She had a kerosene lantern, and she would begin Genesis, and she says, "In the beginning the world was barren and so forth, and it was dark," and she would cut the light off of the lantern, and we was like, "Woo-hoo." We were scared. And then she says, "And God spoke, and then there was light," and she would light up the lantern, and she would throw candy at us and we was like, "It was light." And then she would talk some more about Genesis. She didn't know it exactly because, again, she couldn't read or write, but she would tell us the story, and we fell in love with God because he created the Earth, he created the animals, he created us. So that was our first kind of introduction to God.

Brenda Coates ([15:49](#)):

Through your grandmother?

Thelma E. Smoot ([15:50](#)):

Mm-hmm, it was through my grandmother.

Brenda Coates ([15:51](#)):

And the stories?

Thelma E. Smoot ([15:54](#)):

Yeah. I started mimicking her to my siblings and then started writing my own stories. And then with my children, I used to tell them stories and put them as characters in the stories because there weren't too many stories with us as people. Back then, we couldn't even go to the library to rent books, so that's why her storytelling was so interesting to me. I also remember we had the encyclopedia set that mama had bought from the Pot & Pan Man I used to always read all the nursery rhymes and all the stories within the encyclopedia, and the poetry. I fell in love with words back then and always wished that my great-grandmother could read because she would have loved it.

Brenda Coates ([16:42](#)):

Okay. That's very interesting. Okay. So when your grandmother started telling you these stories around the Bible, about what age were you?

Thelma E. Smoot ([17:03](#)):

I was too young to start school. I probably was like five.

Brenda Coates ([17:06](#)):

Okay. So that storytelling like that went on through about what age in school?

Thelma E. Smoot ([17:18](#)):

Probably for a long time, until we were still interested. I always was interesting. I'm four years apart from my sister and three from my brother. So for me, I probably was interested until I was about 12, and my siblings kind of drifted off from her storytelling.

Brenda Coates ([17:39](#)):

Okay. So when you started school, what grade school did you go to?

Thelma E. Smoot ([17:46](#)):

Well, I went to Mechanicsville Elementary School, and I started school during a soft integration, meaning my brother and sister was still going to Banneker, the colored school. They took a select few of first graders to integrate them into Mechanicsville Elementary, and I was one of those select few. I always called myself the Ruby Bridges of St. Mary's because I didn't know... I knew of racism, but it really didn't affected me because I was loved within my family. I loved my Blackness. I loved my grandparents. I loved my aunts. I had aunts and uncles that had their unique personalities, their funny stories. My grandparents had laps to sit on, candy to hand out.

([18:40](#)):

And my mother was loving and she prayed over us. She used to tell us stories. She used to sing to us. And my daddy was always pulling on my pigtails. I was well loved. And my cousins from the city had fun games to play because they didn't have the woods to hang out in, they had only a sidewalk. They taught us hopscotch. They taught us "Miss Mary Mack, Mack all dressed in black" those little games and stuff like that.

([19:14](#)):

So I was well loved, and I never felt hatred until I stepped foot on that school bus my first day of going to elementary school. It started as soon as I stepped foot on that bus. I felt like Alice in Wonderland stepping foot in that rabbit hole.

Brenda Coates ([19:36](#)):

So about how long did that feeling last, or did it last until you left the school?

Thelma E. Smoot ([19:45](#)):

Well, my mother started working as a teacher's aide. I didn't know until I got to school. She was probably worried too. She worked as a teacher's aide. Every day, I knew she only worked half a day. She was going home at noon. I played sick. I went to the principal's office, and I said, "Oh, I'm dying. I'm dying. I got to go home." So they let me go home for a while until they caught on. Because I was reading and doing math at a third-grade level before I even entered school, because my sister and brother used to play school with me and they taught me everything I needed to know that they was learning in a colored school. So I was way advanced. My teacher would step on my paper and ball it up. All my answers were right, and she couldn't grade it bad. And then I would tell Mrs. DiMangio, who was our principal at that time, what she was doing, and she got on the teacher. So she would still grade my paper right, but she couldn't help but put a smudge somewhere on my paper. So it was hard.

([20:58](#)):

But then when I went to Margaret Brent, it was more people of my color, and I thought it was going to be heaven, everything was going to change. I was taking advanced classes, and my own people said,

"You're acting like you're white because you're taking advanced classes." I thought I was going to be embraced, I thought I was going to have friends, and I still was treated like a nerd, like an outcast. I says, "I can't help it if 1 plus 1 is 2. I'm not doing it." I'm doing algebra in sixth grade, and I'm doing calculus in the seventh grade. I can't help that. My siblings taught me well and I picked up stuff in Mechanicsville. So I was above most white kids, not just the kids of my own color. It was hard.

(22:03):

But by the time I got to Chopticon, there was so many students, nobody cared what I was doing, so I was more comfortable then. My dad says, "You could go to college if you want," when I graduated because I was excelling in classes, but I was through school. I just wanted to work, and I started working at the FBI.

Brenda Coates (22:29):

Oh, okay.

Thelma E. Smoot (22:29):

Yeah.

Brenda Coates (22:32):

It seems like segregation, integration, all of that really had a big influence on your education and probably what you did afterwards.

Thelma E. Smoot (22:48):

Right. It did, yeah.

(22:51):

Bless you.

Brenda Coates (22:52):

Thank you.

(22:55):

Okay. So once you left high school, then you went to the FBI.

Thelma E. Smoot (23:02):

Right.

Brenda Coates (23:02):

Okay. Tell us something about that.

Thelma E. Smoot (23:08):

It was very interesting. They tried to label me as being a file clerk. That's okay if that was my status, but I knew shorthand. I knew a lot of different stuff. Again, if it wasn't for someone who saw that I was above and beyond that says, "No, uh-uh. You know shorthand, you know this, you know that. Let's test you," and they test me, and I became a secretary stenographer for one of the special agents. And then he says, "Oh, you're above this because you're actually writing my letters. You write my letters better than what I dictate. Let's send you to this department." And he sent me to that department, and they said,

"You should be running the department," which was not actually true, but it made me feel good. So they made me the supervisor of the department, and I stayed in that department until I started working closer to home because I had kids and I wanted to be more involved and then work, and I didn't want to live in DC. I still wanted to be close to home. Yeah.

Brenda Coates ([24:27](#)):

Okay. So from the time you started until you got your first promotion, when they found that you could do more than just filing, about how long did that take?

Thelma E. Smoot ([24:40](#)):

It took maybe three years. And I also thought that they moved me because I was in the Black Panther Party file. I was reading everything you could read about our history. But it took like three years, because every Black person that come in, they put them as a file clerk. Even though they know more and could do more, they just labeled us.

Brenda Coates ([25:05](#)):

Now, were you writing at this time?

Thelma E. Smoot ([25:13](#)):

In my job, yeah. Yeah, I wrote for my special agent, and he said, "Oh, no, you don't belong here." And then I wrote summaries of investigations and set out leads for investigations in my last job.

Brenda Coates ([25:28](#)):

Okay. When I said writing, I meant...

Thelma E. Smoot ([25:30](#)):

Oh, writing stories?

Brenda Coates ([25:31](#)):

Yes.

Thelma E. Smoot ([25:31](#)):

No, I didn't start writing stories until my son said, "Mom, do a book. Put them in a book. Put them in a book." Because he used to bring all the neighborhood kids over, and I used to tell them stories. All his friends would come over, and I would tell them stories. It was just hilarious. Even adult kids, like his buddies, would come over and they would spend the night, and he says, "Mama, tell us a story before we go to bed." I says, "Y'all grown," but I would tell them a story.

Brenda Coates ([26:07](#)):

Okay. When you were in school, what did you dream of becoming?

Thelma E. Smoot ([26:10](#)):

When I was in school, I don't know, I always loved writing, always wanted to be a writer. When I had kids, I just felt like I never had the time to do it because I was busy. I always wanted to run my own

business. I wanted to have my own store. I just wanted to do something to make a difference in the world. I never really knew that I had the right to become, you know. Even as a little girl when I was on a school bus, that's the first time I hated being Black, but now I love my Blackness. But back then, I hated being Black, and that's a sin. You shouldn't hate being who you are, but back then I hated it. I didn't want to be white, but I wanted to be equal.

Brenda Coates ([27:22](#)):

Okay. That's probably... Yeah, like you said, you did not not want to be Black, but you didn't want to be picked on either.

Thelma E. Smoot ([27:33](#)):

Right.

Brenda Coates ([27:33](#)):

Yeah. Okay. When you were coming along, how involved were you in the church and the community, the community affairs and whatever?

Thelma E. Smoot ([27:52](#)):

When I was like 16... You know Carrie Glascoe?

Brenda Coates ([27:57](#)):

Yes.

Thelma E. Smoot ([27:58](#)):

She got me involved in the voting registration. I would sit with her, and then she would have me go pick up people who didn't have transportation to go vote during the voting season and stuff like that. And then when my kids were young, I would teach CCD. And then I changed my religion after they got a little older to Methodist. And then I became a member of the women's group in the Methodist church. I became a certified lay speaker. I worked with the Hope Pregnancy Center raising money and doing little skits with my daughter for teas and so forth to raise money for the church.

([28:48](#)):

Right now, within Relevant Church, we do a lot of things behind the scenes. I'm like the tech support for the church, and on Sunday services, we... You know that big screen you see with the musical lyrics on when the praise team sang so everybody can know the words to the song? We work the praise team projection screen. And also when the pastor does his scripture reading within his message, we put up the scriptures. My daughter's involved with it too. We're like a tag team. She puts up the YouTube video so people can watch it from home. I also do the serving. I do coffee in the morning and bring in the snacks and stuff like that, so people can eat and fellowship before service and after service.

([29:45](#)):

Also, outside of church, I work, not work for, volunteer with the Department of Aging. I do a lot of book presentations with the Department of Aging. Like with "What's in a Name", there's a part in there about domestic violence. I did a presentation focusing on women on domestic violence, and it was heartfelt, and I gave out a lot of gift cards and stuff with that. And after I did the presentation, a woman came up to me and she said, "When you told us your story, I felt like you was looking through my window, like you knew my life. Because everything you said, it was about me," and she gave me the biggest hug. And

then another woman came up to me and she brought a tobacco stick that her husband had fashioned for her, because my grandmother Ida was in this book, and she said, "You touched me with the tobacco stick because my husband is no longer here, and he fashioned the stick for me." And there's a little horror part in this book about the flies, and this one woman said, "Thelma, what about the flies? What about the flies?"

(31:04):

I do readings from here on a part that could relate to the seniors, like The Bully Within. I explain how seniors can be bullied too, especially with healthcare. When they go to the doctors, some of the physicians don't listen to you because they push you through just to get your copay and your Medicare bill paid. They don't listen to you as is, and you need to tell them to listen, or find another doctor because you are still human. Just because you old, doesn't mean you should be in pain. I relate it to them so they can feel good. I volunteer. I think that's my community service on that end.

Brenda Coates (31:54):

So all three of your books hold those kind of stories?

Thelma E. Smoot (31:59):

Yes.

Brenda Coates (31:59):

Okay.

Thelma E. Smoot (32:00):

And you can relate it to a lot of different things. Like the Chronicles of Leroy June, I want seniors to document their history. A lot of people don't know what their grandmother or grandfather did in their early days, and I want them to appreciate their grandparents.

Brenda Coates (32:20):

And listen to them when they walk in through the woods.

Thelma E. Smoot (32:22):

Right. Yeah, like I should have. But I want them to know what they did. Yeah. When I did my grandfather's book, I fell in love with him all over again because of a lot of things I didn't know that he had did. I was reintroduced to him.

Brenda Coates (32:44):

Okay.

(32:44):

At this point, let me ask any of the committee members, do you have any questions so far to ask?

Alma Jordon (32:58):

I think you're covering everything very well. I was very interested in your books.

Thelma E. Smoot (33:07):

Thank you.

Alma Jordon ([33:11](#)):

I read all three of them. It's quite well done, quite a history, especially your grandfather and the bullying and all. If you want to elaborate any more on that, it would be nice, your writing and how you got into writing.

Thelma E. Smoot ([33:29](#)):

Well, I kind of got into writing based on the storytelling from my grandmother. They're all in my head. I think about them, the stories, all the time. When you put it on paper, you're kind of releasing it. The first book took me forever to do because I was afraid to let it go. I was afraid that what people are going to think about me when they read this, because that's your story and you're telling things that are close to your heart. But I have a good friend, Debbie Smith, that when my son passed away, she was my grief counselor and we became really close friends. She used to work for a publishing company, and she proofread my draft and she says, "Thelma, this is good," and she says, "It's better than some of the books that used to come through the publishing company," and she encouraged me to let it go, but it was two more years before I could go ahead and let it go and publish it.

([34:39](#)):

When you have something that's close to your heart, you're afraid to put it out in the world. It's like a baby. You don't want to say, "Here, you go and hold it."

Brenda Coates ([35:02](#)):

Okay. Do you feel... Looking back at what you've done up until the time that you actually really started seriously writing, was it, um, anything during that period of time that you wish you could have gone back and changed?

Thelma E. Smoot ([35:26](#)):

Yeah, a lot. I wish I was stronger in my younger days, especially within my first marriage, and did things differently. I wish I could have spent more time with my grandfather and just let him know how much he meant to me and how proud I was of him.

([36:01](#)):

And with my son, with his passing, he know he was loved. Because when he passed, we went to his job to tell everyone there that he had passed. He worked at Macy's. When we came up to his boss's office, everyone came up, and they already knew our names, me and Tamica. And the seamstress came up, and she says, "I know Brandon's size. The manager had already said we're going to donate everything he's going to wear." She says, "Oh, he's about this size. His waist is this size." She knew things about Brandon. I didn't know his exact size. He was like six-four, skinny guy. I would judge his size, but she knew his exact size. They says, "Oh, he loves the Ravens. Let's get him purple. Let's get him white. Let's do this." The whole store just took off running. They knew me and Tamica's life story.

([37:22](#)):

Even the stores next to Macy came up and was telling us how sorry they was about Brandon, how much he loved us, how much he talked about us. I wish I knew... I kind of knew it, but I wish I had embraced him more and told him how proud I was of him. I have his journal. I plan on publishing that next, because he loved to write. That was his part of coping with anger and frustration. He would run and also write in his journal. I guess I got it from my great-grandmother, and he got it from me.

Brenda Coates ([38:07](#)):

Does your daughter write?

Thelma E. Smoot ([38:13](#)):

No, she hates to write, but she's a gifted speaker. She is exceptional. She'll put you in tears. She can recite all of Maya Angelou's poetry. Since a little girl, since she was like, what, five, I used to take her around to the different churches, especially First Baptist. She had those people standing on their feet at five years old reciting "Just Like Job". They couldn't believe she understood and knew that poem. She has a gift.

Brenda Coates ([38:58](#)):

Okay.

Nathaniel Lawrence ([38:58](#)):

The man who thinks he has no fault?

Thelma E. Smoot ([38:58](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Brenda Coates ([38:58](#)):

I didn't ask you this earlier. But when you were growing up, did your family do much traveling?

Thelma E. Smoot ([39:06](#)):

Well, granddaddy used to take us a lot of places, my grandfather, June, to Manning and to Baltimore. Just road traveling. I've never been out of the country. I don't choose to go out of the country. I have immunity issues. You know before COVID, how you had to stay in your home and wear a mask and stay away from people, sanitize? I have a bone marrow disorder that I used to have to stay at home, and if I had to go out, I used to have to wear a mask before COVID even happened. But they have me on different medications now where I can go out and do different things.

Brenda Coates ([39:55](#)):

Okay.

Thelma E. Smoot ([39:56](#)):

Yeah.

Brenda Coates ([39:59](#)):

That sort of cut down how much you can travel.

Thelma E. Smoot ([40:03](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Brenda Coates ([40:05](#)):

Okay. Have you seen... Well, okay. Tell us about the changes you've seen in the county from maybe when you were 10 or 11 when you first started realizing it until now. What kind of changes have you seen? Are those changes good or bad?

Thelma E. Smoot ([40:31](#)):

Some of the changes is for the good, but it's a lot of hidden discrimination. It's just better ways of hiding it. I have a mixed bag of friends. I have Hispanic friends, I have white friends, I have Chinese friends, I have Black friends, and I can really consider them friends. But the bulk of them, it's still a lot of discrimination there. When you think it's getting better, you see something, you hear something. We was in a restaurant, and this young girl was sitting with her family, and she's so excited about her wedding and she says, "Oh, let me go to the bathroom. We can talk about the wedding more when I get back." And the other girl says, "She got Black friends. I don't know whether I'm going to go to her wedding reception or not because they're going to be there." I'm like, "Oh, my goodness." So it's not completely gone.

([41:50](#)):

And I see it a lot in the stores. I'm thanking a man for his service because he all dressed in the military. He looked at me like I slapped him in the face. I says, "Maybe he's deaf," so I said it again, "Thank you for your service, sir," and he still didn't say anything. I says, "Well, excuse me."

Brenda Coates ([42:10](#)):

So really hasn't change?

Thelma E. Smoot ([42:15](#)):

No. Some, but not all.

Brenda Coates ([42:22](#)):

How do you feel about the Base coming down here? How did that affect the changes that you see and don't see? How much did the Base-

Thelma E. Smoot ([42:34](#)):

It's still not fair. I went to the "Roundtable". You ever heard of the round table they had in Leonardtown? Well, we ate dinner out in this roundtable, and we were supposed to sit and discuss the community and changes that we think is still unfair. They don't hire enough Black people on the Base. And if they hire them, it's for cutting the grass and different things like that, or they hire them for jobs that they know is going to be eliminated or there's no opportunity for growth even though they're degreed and so forth. So it's no real change. When we did the roundtable, you all talk about subjects in a group, and then we were supposed to come back and discuss the subjects and figure out what we can do to make it better. The roundtable turned into a flat table because we never got back together to invoke any changes. The initiative was good, but it never launched. And when you kept asking about it, "Oh, we're going to get back together. We're going to do something," but nothing's ever done.

Brenda Coates ([43:50](#)):

Do you think that that's because it may not be any one or two people who really are pushing it? It's sort of something somebody says, "We should do this," or, "We'll start it," but they really don't necessarily want it, but they know that they should make the effort?

Thelma E. Smoot ([44:18](#)):

I think they know they should make the effort, but I don't think they have enough people to institute it or there's someone stopping it. Someone, my sister called it the echelon, the upper crust, they're stopping it. They're not going to let it happen.

Brenda Coates ([44:39](#)):

Okay. I guess I never thought about that. I haven't thought of it. Okay.

([44:50](#)):

Okay. If you could go back, would you change your life? Anything you've done?

Thelma E. Smoot ([44:59](#)):

No, because it made me who I am today, and I kind of like the person I am today.

Brenda Coates ([45:08](#)):

Okay. All those feelings that you have, like you said, you like yourself today and whatever, all of that comes out in your books?

Thelma E. Smoot ([45:20](#)):

Yeah, it does. It kind of helped me deal with the issues I had. I want people to see me as human, as the same, having the same emotions, the feelings as anyone has, requiring the same respect as the next person. I want to be remembered as someone who cares, who was Christ-like, who has faith. And my faith has gotten me through some hard times, and it's given me joy through some happy times. Yeah.

Brenda Coates ([46:15](#)):

I forgot to ask you earlier, you were saying that you had changed religions.

Thelma E. Smoot ([46:20](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Brenda Coates ([46:21](#)):

And so what church are you? Because you had been with Immaculate Conception, right?

Thelma E. Smoot ([46:26](#)):

Yeah. I'm with Relevant Church now. It's a mix of everybody, it's more like a community church, and they do missionary work, and they do outreach within the community.

Brenda Coates ([46:39](#)):

And where is that?

Thelma E. Smoot ([46:42](#)):

That's off of Great Mills Road in Lexington Park. It's a branch.

Brenda Coates ([46:47](#)):

Oh. Chancellor's...

Thelma E. Smoot ([46:48](#)):

Huh? Relevant-

Brenda Coates ([46:48](#)):

Chancellor's Run?

Thelma E. Smoot ([46:49](#)):

Yeah. No, it's off of Great Mills Road in Lexington Park. It's where the old food bank used to be. You know where Chesapeake School is at?

Brenda Coates ([47:06](#)):

Oh, over there where Good Samaritan was.

Thelma E. Smoot ([47:08](#)):

Yeah. It's right there. It's right there. We just moved on that spot.

Brenda Coates ([47:12](#)):

Okay, okay. I know there are a number of questions that I should be asking that I can't think of right now. Do you have anything that you want to add that I should have been asking you?

Thelma E. Smoot ([47:33](#)):

Just that I'm so thankful that this group is doing what they're doing, putting down our oral histories, our Black history. I don't like people when they say, "Well, that happened in the past, so forget about it." But I don't like people when they try to marginalize our Black history. It happened, and our Black history gives us self-worth. It tells us that we're not victims. We have a victory that we've overcome, but it's still a fight that needs to continue because it's still a lot of unjustness that's out there. We should have equal opportunities. We still have unequal places within our society. Although they tried to hide it, put it, sweep it under the rug, it's still there, and we shouldn't forget it. We forget it because there's so many other things out there that's happening, but we should never forget where we came from. We should always, always remember the past. Because if we don't, it's going to happen again. So I am so thankful for all of y'all for what you're doing.

Brenda Coates ([49:10](#)):

Okay.

([49:12](#)):

I will ask the rest of the committee, any questions? Oh, well, it seems like there are no other questions.

([49:25](#)):

I really enjoyed this-

Thelma E. Smoot ([49:26](#)):

Well, thank you.

Brenda Coates ([49:29](#)):

... especially the part of when you were talking about your grandmother walking through the woods and you realize now what you missed by not listening carefully. We all do that, but... You had the time with her with the tobacco stick and sitting in her lap, listening to her tell the stories from Genesis. And not being able to read, but to tell you the stories in a way that made you want to learn it, so that was important, and the fact that you were able to release your hold on your first book and be able to let it go in order for us out here to get the wisdom that your grandmother gave you.

Thelma E. Smoot ([50:35](#)):

Oh, thank you.

Brenda Coates ([50:36](#)):

Thank you very much.

Thelma E. Smoot ([50:38](#)):

Okay. You're so welcome.