

Ulysses Gene Thibodeaux '71
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Black Lives
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Transcribed by Junelle Matthias '23

MATTHIAS: My name is Junelle Matthias I'm at Ledyard Apartments in Hanover, New Hampshire. I am doing a zoom interview with Gene Thibodeaux who is in the Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Today is October 24, 2021, and this is an interview for the Dartmouth Black Lives Oral History Project. Hello Gene thank you so much for joining me today, first, I like to learn a little bit more about your childhood, can you please state when and where you were born.

THIBODEAUX: Yes, I was born in a small Hamlet in Southwest Louisiana and the Hamlet is called Mallet, Louisiana. I'm in my office now and the copy machine is in the background. It's finishing.

The small hamlet is a farming community. My father was a small farmer of 40 acres, and he planted cotton, corn and sweet potatoes and rice and I grew up in that community, a very Catholic community for 13 years. Now, before moving to Lake Charles Louisiana which we call the big city, which is approximately 75,000 people at the Parish, which you all called counties has approximately 200,000. So, my early formative years were in a small-town small Hamlet. There were no stoplights and no street signs. It was only one gathered Church, which was a gathering of point for the community.

I went to elementary school there and we moved when I was in eighth grade to Lake Charles Louisiana.

MATTHIAS: And when was that? When did you move?

THIBODEAUX: In 1964.

MATTHIAS: And prior to 1964 did your family always reside in that small Hamlet?

THIBODEAUX: Yes.

MATTHIAS: Okay, and you said, your father was a farmer how was that, like when you were growing up?

THIBODEAUX: I'm sorry.

MATTHIAS: And you said, your father owned 40 acres.

THIBODEAUX: Correct 40 acres.

MATTHIAS: And how was that growing up, with such big lands?

THIBODEAUX: Well, we formed the land and we fit ourselves. I was one of 11 siblings, and we all work. We all thought that school started in the end of September, because we were working in the fields, before going to school. I really didn't work that hard and it feels because my older brothers and sisters protected me from that. I did a lot of reading in those days; I think I read every book in the library twice. It taught us the value of community because everyone knew each other, and it taught us the value of hard work.

My father was also a laborer, who worked on construction projects in Lake Charles Louisiana. So, he would get up in the mornings, at 3 or 4 o'clock catch a bus to Lake Charles then arrive back in Mallet, the small hamlet around 5 or 5:30 and from there went to work in the fields. I just thought that that was natural and that is what fathers did. I later learned that that was a hell of a sacrifice to do that. And, but I was naive, I was young, and I said, well that's what that is what father's do. And so it also taught me the value of love and the value of giving to your family, protecting your family.

Think about it. You're getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning catching a bus to work in the industrial areas of Lake Charles. Lake Charles is an industrial petrochemical community and then having to come back and work at field from five to six to seven o'clock eight o'clock at night.

MATTHIAS: Yeah, that is, that was a sacrifice. You mentioned that you're one of 11 siblings, were you the youngest?

THIBODEAUX: No, I was number nine. I have sisters who are twins who are three years younger than me. I am 72, well, not quite I will be 72 in 10 days and my siblings who are twins are 69.

THIBODEAUX: And my older sister pretty much raised me, and I think she's still thinks that I am her son rather than her brother.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned that your older siblings protected you and you have found time to do reading were, how did that factor when you move to Lake Charles and started high school?

THIBODEAUX: I'm sorry, how did that what?

MATTHIAS: How did that factor into your life when you move to Lake Charles and started high school?

THIBODEAUX: My older brothers and sisters, except, with the exception of two did not have the opportunity to finish high school.

They did not want me to live that life until they knew that reading and education were probably the roads to success and the roads, out of Mallet arose out of that hamlet. And so I was well read, quite frankly, at the time, so when we move to Lake Charles the folks at Lake Charles referred to us as from down East, which is east of Lake Charles and we spoke with a Creole French accent. And so they associate that with a lack of sophistication, they associated that with being less than intelligent and so they were very surprised that I quickly went from being that guy from down East to the head of my class.

And I played clarinet while in the small hamlet from sixth grade through eighth grade. So, when I entered the high school in the larger city, I was well versed in music, so I quickly went from being the fourth seat on the band to the first Chair in the clarinet section and saxophone section.

MATTHIAS: And was the band the only club you are involved in in high school?

THIBODEAUX: Oh, I was in everything. The French club, the band and the national honor society. I played intramural basketball, I was part of the key club, I was president in my class. Those types of things.

So I quickly rosed into leadership positions during my tenure at Washington high school [LA], Junelle. Which is where I went. That school no longer exist, it was merged with the predominantly white school and it's now Washington Marion high school.

MATTHIAS: Okay, you mentioned that your older siblings wanted you to finish high school because that was an opportunity they didn't get, so my

question is after finishing high school what was your motivation to continue on into higher education?

THIBODEAUX: Well, I knew I didn't want to work in a farm. I knew I did not want to work in the industrial complexes in Lake Charles. I knew I did not want to be a laborer and so from an early age I always wondered what do I want to be when I grow up? Do I want to be a priest? And I thought about going to the seminary. Or, do I want to be an actor? Do I want to be an engineer? Do I want to be a chemist? Do I want to be a lawyer? I did not know, but those things were constantly on my mind.

And I knew that the only way to get out of that environment was to be educated and so that was my motivation. I knew that I wanted to make money. I knew that I wanted to contribute to society, because I saw what others had become when you were not educated.

MATTHIAS: And did your other siblings who went to high school also followed on into higher education?

THIBODEAUX: No, only a brother before me decided to go to and complete college.

MATTHIAS: And do your siblings still reside on your farmer, your father's land?

THIBODEAUX: Ah, no. I have four siblings who died. There are all older than me and they all died of cancer.

Fortunately, I don't smoke. I don't have that much of worry. I have a brother who lives in Spring, Texas. A sister lives in Houston, Texas, and three sisters and a brother who live in Lake Charles where I live.

My parents, my parents are deceased.

MATTHIAS: Speaking of your parents, you mentioned your father, but not your mom. What did your mom do?

THIBODEAUX: My mother was a homemaker, and she worked on a farm with my siblings and with my father. When we moved to Lake Charles, she was not able to work because she's suffered debilitating stroke. So, she was a homemaker when we when we lived in Lake Charles, and she died when I was a junior at Dartmouth.

MATTHIAS: My condolences. Speaking of Dartmouth when did you first hear of Dartmouth?

THIBODEAUX: It was my senior year of high school I had never heard of Dartmouth before, and my high school counselor enrolled me in a program called Cooperative Program for Educational Opportunity. Which was at that time, headquartered at Yale, and so the councilors office had me take a series of tests. Achievement test. And apparently, I did well on those tests, and they were sent to the office at Yale, the Cooperative Program for Educational Opportunity, which sent my test scores to various colleges and universities across the country. And so I received letters from probably 200 colleges and universities, asking for my application.

One of which was Dartmouth, so I applied to Dartmouth and got accepted and waited until the last day to really accept the offer. It was between Dartmouth and Xavier University in New Orleans and many of my friends were going.

And so I heard of Dartmouth through the Cooperative Program for Educational Opportunity.

MATTHIAS: What made you decide to choose Dartmouth, instead Xavier?

THIBODEAUX: One it was the money. I had a full ride, a full scholarship along with a small loan and a work study offer, and it was an Ivy league school. While Xavier was a good school and my wife went to Xavier, I have no regrets in attending. So, I was really a matter of, the status of the academic environment and the financial assistance that was offered.

MATTHIAS: And what clubs are you involved in while you was at Dartmouth?

THIBODEAUX: The Afro-American Society, Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity for one year, Green Key, Casque and Gauntlet and the Tucker Foundation.

MATTHIAS: And you said you're in Delta Kappa for one year. Did you de-pledge?

THIBODEAUX: Did I do what?

MATTHIAS: Did you de-pledge or did you join your senior year before you graduated?

THIBODEAUX: Oh no, this is my first year and after first year I decided that that was not for me. Fraternity was not for me, and so I disengaged myself from the fraternity.

MATTHIAS: And what was your role in the Afro [American] Society, did you have an exec position or were you were just a member?

THIBODEAUX: I was a member, and I participated in all their activities including the protest that existed on campus.

MATTHIAS: Okay, and how did you being involved in the Afro society influence your time at Dartmouth?

THIBODEAUX: Well, it allowed me a sense of solidarity, a sense of being, a sense of brotherhood, a sense of belonging.

In the fall of 1967, there were approximately 800 and I think 25 students entering that first year in a class of 1971. And there were only 16 Black students in that class and 32 as an aggregate number for the entire school. And you have to understand I'm coming from South Louisiana. I'm almost in the Gulf of Mexico. You can't get any farther South than that.

This is my first interaction with white students, because I went to a segregated high school and so Dartmouth was a very strange animal to me both academically and both culturally. And the Afro-American Society provided a shield for me. A sense of protection for me, a sense of comfort.

MATTHIAS: Okay, you mentioned that you were involved in the protest. Can you describe what that was like?

THIBODEAUX: Now of course in that time in 1967 through 1971 the Vietnam War was a big topic of discussion. The Black consciousness movement, the Black power movement was at its height, then. Campus protesters, Students for a Democratic Society was on most campuses and was decrying the lack of moral commitment that the US had, particularly with respect to a more engagement and particularly with respect to, we did not call it an inclusion, then, but particularly with respect to affirmative action.

We had speakers, such as William Shockley. I think he's a physicist by training, but he also was very much engaged in spreading idea that Blacks were intellectually inferior, I mean, inferior. That is, they were born that way and that white society was the preferred society and that back advancement was an

illusion, because of the intellectual inferiority of Black society. He came to speak on campus and we did not allow him to speak on campus.

There is an old picture of me and Black students, along with our sympathetic white students and I think I was — one of my classmates show me that I was — in one of those pictures. I didn't have cell cameras then, we didn't have digital cameras so of course I didn't take pictures. I'm not sure who did.

Molly Ford class of 1970 organized a protest on the middle of the campus, Green, to protest against the Vietnam War and against apartheid in South Africa so those were some of the things I did in protests manner. There were several students who took over the administration building. I think they belong to the Students for Democratic Society. While I was sympathetic with them, I did not join them.

MATTHIAS: And why didn't you join them?

THIBODEAUX: I did not think that that would be, um, I did not think that would do anything really to foster my growth, as a personal part of my growth as a person. Then the students who occupied to building, while we were sympathetic to them, had not really contributed anything for the advancement of Black students on campus so why should I join them?

I mean it was expedient for them to ask us to join us at that time, but I was not going to risk expulsion for that. I mean my father was not an officer of General Motors, he was not a CEO of a major fortune 500 company, and I'm not about to, wasn't about to risk my future, in particular my educational future, on that sort of thing, particularly when I did not see much coming out of that.

MATTHIAS: That's understandable. You mentioned that

THIBODEAUX: I learned how to play poker in the lobby of Hinman hall [part of river cluster] from some of my classmates who were not that interested in going to class because they had, they had a fallback position if they didn't make it in college. So even if they made minimal grades, they knew that they had a future in the business world. I didn't have that advantage. So I didn't take that chance. But they played poker a lot. I observed them and learned how to play poker and to this day, I still play poker. I was not going to sacrifice going to classes just for the purpose, for the hell of playing poker.

MATTHIAS: That's true. You mentioned the Vietnam War, can you speak how drafting was for you like, how did that affect you or not?

THIBODEAUX: What affected me?

MATTHIAS: The Vietnam draft.

THIBODEAUX: Oh yeah. No, I had decided I'm not going to Vietnam. Not because I was afraid of being shot at, not because I was afraid of protecting my country, I just didn't believe in it from a political or moral standpoint. I was going to go to Canada, instead, and I was very serious about that. Fortunately, one of my classmate's father was a military examiner in New York City.

I graduated on June 13, 1971, and I was supposed to report to the draft that following Friday. I was examined, and I remembered that vividly in New York City by Dr Renatus Hartogs who issued a medical report saying that I was not fit for the military service. I think, at that time I was labelled 4F. That was because I had an ankle injury, while playing intramural athletics at Dartmouth. And I had a brother who had a developmentally deficient condition. At that time it was called retarded, now it's called developmentally disabled.

So, on the basis of I assume that report, I was given reclassified 4F and I didn't join the military service. I was able to stay in the United States and I worked for one year with the dean of students at Dartmouth before deciding what I wanted to do. I did not know whether or not I would go to business school or law school, it was definitely not Medical School.

I decided after that one year — gap year — I decided that law school would be my best path to assisting doing what I wanted to do. And that is to come back to assist my community in social and political activities, to practice, to use law as a means of changing society. And we all thought when we finished, that we would come back to our communities, and we would have a revolution. A revolution, as a country. That didn't quite happen. We made a few changes, but we certainly did that accomplished our goal of revolutionizing our communities and our country.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned that you played intramural athletics what sports did you play?

THIBODEAUX: In high school I played basketball and in college I played softball, and basketball.

MATTHIAS: Okay. Where those the varsity team, or like a club sport?

THIBODEAUX: The club sport. No, no, I was not good enough to make it to the varsity team nor did I want to. I wanted to get myself to academics.

MATTHIAS: So, going back to education, I know, like how did the start, or like the creation of the African and African American Department impacted your Dartmouth experience?

THIBODEAUX: It made me want to do good, and it also taught me that in order to do good, you must do well. If you're suffering, and you cannot pay the rent, pay the mortgage, pay employees, you want, you will not have the time nor the desire nor the ability or capacity to effect, to effect change. It taught me, the value of history, taught me the value of my person. It taught me the value of my race.

And taught me that you know we're all in this together, regardless of our various views, we are various cultures and subcultures within the Black community. You know, we have folks who are dark skinned as you are. We have folks who are light skinned, as I am, but that should not create divisions within that community. And so it certainly taught me that. It taught me that the value of community, taught me the value of solidarity, and it taught me to value of appreciating ourselves, and it exposed me to various writers that I was not expose to in high school.

You know the William Douglass's, Frederick Douglass's of the world, the Amiri Baraka's as of the world, the Angela Davis's of the world. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison. Those sorts of unique and change agents in our society.

MATTHIAS: So speaking of your values of race and not being divided, do you remember where you were when Martin Luther king was assassinated?

THIBODEAUX: I certainly I do remember that very vividly. I was studying in my dorm room. April 4th, the spring semester of my first year and I remember being very angry and my white suit mates who did not consider that very significant because it did not impact them that much, even though he was a revolutionary figure. And moments after he was assassinated, we all gathered.

[Forrester] Woody Lee, who was a Yale professor at Yale Medical School now, was the president of the Afro American Society, and we all gathered at Rollins Chapel or the lobby, I don't quite recall, but one of the dorms to discuss well, what does that mean to us. How do we celebrate his legacy on campus within the next few days? How do we move forward in explaining to white classmates what this means to America and what this means to me personally? So yeah I remember that very, very vividly.

MATTHIAS: And what's the name of the dorm that you resided in?

THIBODEAUX: My first year was Hinman, my second year was Cohen and my third and fourth years were at 209 Ripley Hall, and my classmate was Frank Watkins from Brooklyn New York Boys High. Our dorm room 209 Ripley, we had a suit really, was the stopping point. There are many of our Black students gathered just before going to a football game.

MATTHIAS: I see. And you mentioned that you guys gathered to educate your white peers and why Martin Luther King's assassination was so significant. Were you able to achieve that goal?

THIBODEAUX: I think so. I mean to the extent that we could. We certainly could not educate the whole campus, but we were able to educate those who are around us. And to give you a couple of examples. I had a classmate from I think Boise, Idaho, who in his entire life had never met a black person. The only black person he had seen was the folks on the Bill Cosby show. [Laughter] And he didn't think that I was black because of the fairness of my skin.

And so he was very cur - he was very ignorant, not in a nefarious way. He was just naïve. And so I had to explain to him the uniqueness of Black society, the various subcultures of Black society. And to my suit mates now we held meetings and, quite frankly, to their advantage they were curious about why does this all matter to me or to us. I remember I had to explain to one of my classmates, one of my suit mates from Pelham New York.

We had to write a paper. I think on Paradise Lost. And the paper was on my desk. And he happened to stumble into my room, and he read the paper. And he called me BoDoo. My name is Thibodeaux, but he called me BoDoo. He said, this is pretty good, and so I wonder, why do you think this is, were you surprised that this is pretty good. You know, I guess he thought this is a black guy from the deep south, and he comes from Hicksville he doesn't know what this is all about. And so, I had to explain to him that he

would not say that to a white student. Why he's just saying that to me? Did he think I didn't belong there?

I had to have long conversations with him explaining certain stereotypes that had to be gotten rid of. You bring a baggage to the plate, and that was part of his baggage. The stereotypical image, and all those things that comes with the stereotypical image, and all those negative images that one can conjure. Before too long, he became one of my best friends.

When you have to confront that, you've gotta confront that and I learned how to because of the Black studies program, because of the Afro American Society. It made me confront those realities and made me face those realities. Made me recognize those realities and I use that today. I don't let people get away with things. Not because I was a former judge, but I'm going to challenge it. I'm going to challenge you. In challenging people Junelle, you really you, you're performing a function. You're actually educating them for free [laughter] tuition free.

MATTHIAS: So, you mentioned that everyone had bring their baggage to the plate like while you were educating him, did you realize that any baggage that you had on your plate in that time?

THIBODEAUX: That I had what?

MATTHIAS: Any baggage that you had on your plate during that time?

THIBODEAUX: Yeah, of course, everyone has biases. Some subconscious and some unconscious biases that you've got to go to deal with. I went on campus believing what I've been told all my life that a kid from South Louisiana, particularly if you're Black would not succeed as well as others. I certainly overcame that. I remember making the dean's list my first trimester and, of course, all of the Black students, all 16 were very proud of that. I came to campus not knowing a hell of a lot about white society. I learned about white society. I thought that all white people are racist and that they really didn't care about social justice, they only cared about advancing themselves.

And I had read more of Martin Luther King's book, Letters from a Birmingham Jail, where he said that it really hits — our enemy is not those, like the KKK who will take affirmative negative actions against us — as those liberals who refuse to speak out and let things happen and are not as vigilant in their deeds as they are in their words.

No yeah, I learned that. I learned that. I know, just as in the biases that we have, you have to learn how to overcome that sort of thing. You have to recognize them first whether they're implicit or explicit. And once you recognize that, then you can move forward. It's no different than being a judge. You bring your baggage to the table as a judge. You recognize that, and you try to overcome that in your rulings. Dartmouth played in a very central part in assisting me with that sort of stuff. That you know you're not perfect, that you have a baggage, that you have to dispel and get rid or at least recognize.

It was not only a good academic experience. A good and difficult academic experience. It was a good cultural experience and it made me mature. Much more mature as an individual. I thought, when I finished law school at age 24, 25 I thought I could conquer the world. In fact, I thought I was ready to leave Dartmouth after my third year. That is what else is there to learn [laughter] and my roommate kids me about that to this day.

MATTHIAS: What's the name of your roommate?

THIBODEAUX: Sorry.

MATTHIAS: What was the name of your roommate?

THIBODEAUX: Frank Watkins [71]. He's a Dr Watkins now. He's an orthopedist who practices in New York. He lived in Westchester County for a long time, and he moved a couple years ago to Stanford Connecticut. But this my roommate Frank. We talk all the time, and we develop lasting friendships. And you probably didn't know that Junelle. You develop, most of your lasting friendships are developed in college as opposed to elementary school, as opposed to your high school friends. We keep up with each other, just about every member of my class, those members who are still alive keep up with each other, because we can remember that closeness that we had during our four years at Dartmouth, and we remember that closeness that we had our first year.

MATTHIAS: Okay, how was your transition from high school that was segregated to being at Dartmouth. How was that like?

THIBODEAUX: [Laughter] It was challenging. One, I had not been in that environment before. That cultural environment, I had not been in that racial environment, and I had not been in that academic environment. It was intimidating. Imagine for one who is has gone

to a private prep school, it can be intimidating. So one who's come from a public segregated high school in the deep South that's also very intimidating. So how did I deal with the intimidation? By sinking myself into my studies and by developing lasting friendships with supportive classmates, particularly supportive Black classmates.

You know you get on campus, and you say what the hell, did I get into? And then, what did I get into, and can I deal with that? And then there were some doubt that first year. Everyone goes through that. You're homesick and you want to get closer to home and get close to your friends and your families. And then you decide it's very good to be outside of that environment because you get the opportunity to be much more expansive from a human standpoint than you would be if you were enveloped within a cocoon of your friends.

MATTHIAS: So, given this and all the growth that you did from your various programs and being involved with more Black students, how did you connect or did you connect to any of your white peers?

THIBODEAUX: At Dartmouth?

MATTHIAS: Yes.

THIBODEAUX: I connected with them today during our virtual 50th reunion. Several, I was on a panel and several others reconnected then. So it wasn't really a hostile environment Junelle. It was more of an environment of ignorance. It's more of an environment of a lack of exposure. Lack of exposure on behalf of myself, lack of exposure and naivety on behalf of my white schoolmates and classmates. We developed. I developed and still do have a bond with many of my white classmates. And they realized themselves that they had overcome those biases that they brought with them to college campus.

Life is much different if you're living in Shaker Heights than if you're living in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Life is much different if you're living in Westchester County and if you're living in Jamaica, okay. We had a good time, overcoming those things, and sometimes we never, sometimes we disagreed. So what? At least I'm going to learn from you.

It was an educational experience for me from that standpoint, I think I learned, just as much outside of the classroom as I did, inside of the classroom. But I did not take any chances. I hope, I

think I got my work done, because, as I said, I didn't have, my father wasn't the CEO of General Motors [laughter]. And ultimately, because they thought the Black students as something exotic, something fanciful. They wanted to know as much about us as we wanted to know about them. And I remember many of them hung out with us.

They hung out with us because of the experience, because of the learning experience and because of the solidarity among us. There was only 32 of us on campus. They enjoyed that and I think you were envious of that fellowship and that solidarity. They would say, I want to be a part of this too. Can I join you?

MATTHIAS: Speaking of solidarity, what was it like when women rights was becoming more popular Dartmouth was leaning towards co-education? What was the environment on Dartmouth campus like?

THIBODEAUX: Like when? What do you mean?

MATTHIAS: Like 1971 right when there was more women coming on campus but Dartmouth wasn't co-education yet. Can you speak more towards that activism that accord there for women to be on campus?

THIBODEAUX: I remember Meryl Streep. We were sitting in the student Center and Meryl Streep would pass by, and she was going to the drama department and because we were not co-ed we thought that was strange and unusual to be in that kind of environment. I went to a co-ed high school and so why can't we have a coed at college? I thought, and at least other students thought that we were losing something because of that lack of inclusiveness. We were losing something because of what is called normalcy. And I didn't term that phrase.

What's the screenwriters name who graduated from Dartmouth [Shonda Rhimes]. She's like the Thursday Night Queen? She's a screenwriter. She's big in Hollywood. Anyways it doesn't matter. Because of that lack of normal, no that's not normal. That wasn't normal. We were big supporters of co-education not because, not just because of the social enhancement. If somebody today were to go Smith or Mount Holyoke or Wellesley all that sort of thing. We had folks here on campus, so we were selfish because we wanted y'all on campus [laughter].

But we're also supportive of the idea that we were missing, that I mean society, when we finished in 1971, we won't face that kind of

society where women are restricted to their side of the table and we restricted to ours. So we were very, we were big supporters of co-education. I think it added a lot to the to the campus. I mean just think right now.

We have more women in law school than we have males. And so there's going to be a sea change, and there is a sea change now because of the number of women who are now joining law firms and will become partners at major law firm or will become litigators at major law firms. And I'm not sure if that would have happened if the big-time institutions and the prestigious institutions such as Dartmouth, would not have allowed that to happen, to open their doors and to welcome that segment of society. We learned to not look upon women as objects, but as equals.

MATTHIAS: Interesting. You mentioned Smith and Simmons and how the men, back then, would go to those schools and Radcliff colleges, how was it like dating as a black man on campus?

THIBODEAUX: On Dartmouth campus?

MATTHIAS: Yes.

THIBODEAUX: I became comfortable after a while, but I still felt that estrangement. This is not what I'm used to. I'm not used to going from, eating with white folks at the cafeteria. The only way people I saw were those folks who came to collect rent in my neighborhood. Fortunately, we owned our home. My dad, he had to buy his home. So it was very uncomfortable at first, and you tried to become involved in campus community. I'm talking about, one generally decided to let's become involved with athletics, let's become involved with drama, lets become involved in recruiting more Black students. So that life could be more comfortable and that was a major effort on the part of the Afro-American Society.

We convinced the school administration that, hey won't you send us on the road to recruit other Black students in various parts of the country. Won't you send us to college campuses in the South, to Tugaloo, to Tuskegee, to Xavier to Dillard to recruit particularly black women to come on campus. Why? Because we thought that they should have that same opportunity we were having. And we thought that by doing that, by making it more of a multicultural society that everybody would be able to benefit. So we were simply not selfish motive. It with academic and intellectual motives as well.

Being at Dartmouth made me a lawyer. I was interested in chemistry. I was going to be this big researcher. This big chemist. It's not fun walking from Hinman on the River across campus, in three feet of snow to a lab, I said, this is not for me. I'm gonna to do something, I'm gonna to be a teacher, a lawyer, a businessman. But I'm not gonna to continue like this. I became a lawyer because of the snow.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned that you were in activism for more Black students on Dartmouth campus, you were involved in the Black Student Application Encouragement Committee?

THIBODEAUX: Which committee?

MATTHIAS: The Black Student Application Encouragement Committee

THIBODEAUX: It wasn't call that at a time Junelle. It was simply called the Afro American Society and we didn't have any committee. We just volunteered to assist in increasing the number of Black Africans and increasing the number of successful Black Africans. So it went from 32 in 1967 to 1968, to almost 200 two years later. And that was a huge transformation from what we knew as incoming freshmen. And how many of them, two years later, two-three years later, we had such a population that many of them I didn't know.

You tend to travel within your circles. So I can imagine what it is now. It's a huge difference and in fact we did not have enough students to have fraternities or sororities. For those of us in those years, who are now members of the Alphas, the Kappas, the Sigmas, we joined the graduate chapters. I didn't join. I haven't joined yet, and I'm not going to join, but, but those of us in my era, who all members of a Greek organizations, is because they joined the graduate chapters. We didn't have that on campus.

MATTHIAS: Do you feel that the lack of Black Greek life on Dartmouth campus contributed to the environment that was there, or would you wish those fraternities and sororities came about a little earlier, while there's only 16 of you back then?

THIBODEAUX: Not really. This is a persona view. I tend to think of fraternities and sororities as forced to friendships. And so, no I'm glad that we didn't have them quite frankly. Because it did not create that sort of competitiveness among us with such small numbers, why do you have the need to compete? You need to join, not compete? You need to be supportive of each other, not at that, because of some organization. I don't regret that at all. But at the same token,

I don't regret folks join those organizations. As long as they don't live within those organizations completely.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned that you dropped chemistry, because of the snow so what did you end up majoring in?

THIBODEAUX: Government. Ended up majoring in government, but I taught myself a lot of educational initiative through the Tucker Foundation. For example, in the winter of 1969 I taught elementary school in Jersey City, New Jersey as part of a Tucker Foundation initiative. Woody Lee who was in the class of 1969, 68 or 69 was the director of that program in Jersey City. We taught elementary school in Jersey City, I think at PS 29, which was at that time the largest elementary school in the country. We also were involved with the Black Panthers and their breakfast program and their tutorial programs in the afternoon.

In my senior year in the winter of 1971, I taught high school in Richmond, California at John F Kennedy high school. I taught math. I taught English and I taught, at that time it was not African American, it was Black history, I still prefer the term Black History to African American. So I became involved in education at an early time in my adult life. As a student at Dartmouth, it made me much more involved and in becoming much more of a political and social activist, that I would not have been otherwise. And that's one of the reasons I started three charter schools here in my hometown of Lake Charles, Louisiana.

MATTHIAS: Quick question you said you prefer Black history than compared to African American, why is that?

THIBODEAUX: I think the term African American is too limited. If you're Black, you much more of a part of the diaspora, which we know takes in Latin America, it takes in the Caribbean, it takes in the continent of Africa and anywhere, where there are Black people. I don't want to object the term African American. I just prefer to use the term Black because it's more it's more expansive and it's more inclusive, I think.

MATTHIAS: That's true-

THIBODEAUX: And we changed it from Afro-American to African American.

MATTHIAS: How was your experience in the Tucker Foundation, given the political climate at Dartmouth at the time?

THIBODEAUX: It was great. I'm glad I was involved. A lot of your education Junelle comes from the exterior, not the Interior and I found out that this is what the real world is, and these are some of the real-world problems, and these are some of the pragmatic ways that you can approach those problems.

You really don't have a full appreciation of those problems and the implementation of programs to address those problems until you were away from the cocoon. You're growing up. You told me you grow up, where did you grow up?

MATTHIAS: Jamaica.

THIBODEAUX: You're from Jamaica. One, not just you, but one generally tends to work within a small environment. If you're New York City, if you're from Brooklyn how often do you go into Manhattan? You know your environment and you work within that small environment and so by working with the Tucker Foundation it exposed me to that larger environment, not just that intellectually insular Hanover environment.

During my sophomore year, I went with, I forget the name of the President, I studied for three months in Sierra Leone West Africa. And that exposed me to a whole new different world. So we had all those opportunities, all those advantages that really just expanded one as a person and gave one a much broader knowledge of what the world was all about.

At the same time we were insulated in Hanover. Oh, my God what is this? We lost. We're several hours from New York, an hour and a half from Boston so I felt like we were just divorced from everything else that was happening in the outside world. So those programs that were Tucker Foundation sponsored were really, really, really helpful in overcoming that.

I can recall my first year in December of 1967, I left Hanover and caught a plane for the first time in my life in Boston Massachusetts. When I got to Massachusetts, I said wow, we're in civilization again [laughter]. You tend to be, as I said, it's not the real world in Hanover New Hampshire. It's good for intellectual development, it's good for exposure to other students and other cultures, but that's not the real world. That's not the real world, but it was, that's a disadvantage.

An advantage was we were shielded from all this stuff. This negative stuff that's going on in other areas, particularly urban

areas. We were shielded from instability you know we are shielded from poverty; we are so much shielded, we are shielded from violent activities in both urban and rural areas. We're in our own little world. We're just comfortable, but it's not real.

MATTHIAS: So, how did this shielding in this insular isolated New Hampshire have on Dartmouth students who weren't or were experiencing these real world problems?

THIBODEAUX: Who were not experienced?

MATTHIAS: Who were experiencing the real-world problems.

THIBODEAUX: Oh, my. It was a shock. It was a shock, just as it was to me. I grew up in a relative civil society, it was mostly a Black society. But we also had many students later on, who came from the large urban areas, the Clevelands, the Bostons, the New York Citys, the Houston Texas', the Miamis of the world. That sort of thing, and so, some of them were exposed to that and was not, this was not something that was unusual to them.

At that time we had a program, they engaged and enrolled students from Chicago. Gang Members. I don't recall the name of the program [Foundation Years] but there were like 15 or 20 gang members who came to Dartmouth under a special program I think initiated by the Tucker Foundation. A couple years ago in the Dartmouth alumni magazine, there was a story on them, and I still keep up with several of them. In fact, one just texted, not email, friended me on Facebook yesterday. Percy Wiggins. I remember Percy. They were older students, there were much more into real world experiences sometimes bad experiences.

THIBODEAUX: Henry Crumpton [class of '73]. I remember him, I spoke with him several years ago and we keep up by Facebook. Back then it was a relief from the daily activities that they were accustomed to, and many of them were very successful in navigating the Dartmouth environment, the Dartmouth academic environment. So to them, it was no big deal. I know some real problems. I didn't want to experience those kinds of problems and those kinds of issues in that kind of environment, but I think Dartmouth equipped me.

You find out later on that this was a good experience. You find out later on, that he gave you the tools to really implement concrete programs that would benefit your local community and benefit the entire larger community. And it gave you the opportunity to make

lasting relationship and to meet and develop relationships, business relationships, academic relationship that lasted forever.

You can pick up the phone and if you needed somebody in New York City, I know somebody in New York City, or if you, for instance, one at my law clerks, after she finished her tenure with me at the Court, she was moving to Dallas, Texas and needed a job. So I looked up lawyers in the Dallas, Texas area who were Dartmouth grads. Didn't know me. I didn't know them. I said hey, Junelle is looking for employment in the Dallas area. Can you help her, and they did. The value of those relationships, the value of connections connectivity last forever.

MATTHIAS: Speaking of academic relationships, were there any professors at Dartmouth that had an impact on you?

THIBODEAUX: Yeah, Frank Smallwood, a government Professor. Good things. One: I was taking a government course from Professor Smallwood when mother died back in November, just before finals. That's a very emotionally disturbing, and because of that emotion I couldn't prepare for my finals. So I went to him and said look, you know my mother just died and I rather go home, and he said, don't worry about it, Gene. Just take your exams after you get back from beyond the holidays, don't even worry about coming back to the campus. That taught me about humanity.

The gift to humanity, and that there are people that are really concerned about you, not just as a student, but as a person. And so that translated into me being concerned about other folks and not just for professional reasons, but for personal reasons as well. And my French teacher. I came in with the credit in French one so I started French two. I don't know her name, she was my French Professor with a German origin. I don't remember her name, but she said, look — I was very nervous about making it academically and so she made me feel very comfortable under those conditions.

And then another Professor in the English department. He didn't have an impact on me, but he made me realize that sometimes professors didn't think we were we, that we had, that we were enough. That we were not meritorious enough to be there and I recall him telling one of my Black classmates that he didn't think he should be at Dartmouth and so that made me work — yeah he did — and that made me work even harder. It made me realize, that there are some folks on this campus that don't think we should be here. And this was before affirmative action.

I think affirmative action became really big in 1969 when Nixon was President, believe it or not, and Dr. Sullivan [Leon Sullivan] in Philadelphia issued the Sullivan plan. Even though we were not affirmative action kids, affirmative action graduate students still thought of us as that. And so I think some of them were really conscious and kind of make you feel that hey this is, you know you can't stand these academic rigors, and so it made you more vigilant in showing them otherwise.

MATTHIAS: How was the unity between blacks who were part of the Vice Lords, the gang, versus Black who were affluent versus those who weren't. How would you describe the interconnectedness of the Black community?

THIBODEAUX: The interconnectedness a Black community on campus?

MATTHIAS: Yes, among like just the Black community like those who had money, those who didn't, those who were part of the Vice Lords, those who weren't.

THIBODEAUX: There wasn't really a disconnect. There really wasn't a disconnect. We had 16 before. The special program which allow the folks from Chicago to be on campus came like two years, I think it's just a spring/fall of 1969. But, as part of my class we had several of my classmates from well-to-do backgrounds. And we discuss that, one of my classmate's fathers had several funeral homes in New Orleans and he was pretty well-heeled somewhere middle class. Some like myself we're not.

The tuition at time, well, the tuition plus room and board and other related expenses were more than what father made in the entire year. So, no I was not middle-class nor upper middle-class. But we didn't see that as any issue among ourselves at all. It wasn't like, I am Junelle Matthias and I come from a well-heeled background and you do not, and so I'm going to, I'm not going to be deferential to you, but instead I'm going to turn my nose up at you. It wasn't that way at all.

Hell, it couldn't be that way because you couldn't survive in that kind of environment then. You have to remember this is 1967 through 1971. You couldn't survive in an environment if you were going to segregate yourself in that type of caste society. You just couldn't, and we wouldn't let you. If you did that, don't worry we would tell you, and we will remind you. Or we would say look, I'm from the South of the segregated school, but I got better grades

than you [laughter]. So no, that wasn't a problem at all. It was not a barrier. It was not a hurdle at all. It made us realize, we were all in this together.

MATTHIAS: Besides, your dorm —

THIBODEAUX: I'm not sure. And I don't know that, but I get the impression that have that kind of closeness, that kind of unity doesn't exist today on the campus. Kinda, no, no, no, no, it doesn't. You know there's almost, I'm told it's almost a class society division. You belong here and I belong there. I guess that's, the earth spins forward and you've got to spin forward with it. Many of these students or, what are they called? Legacy. Their fathers went, and their mothers went to Dartmouth and their grandmothers and their grandparents went to Dartmouth. I'm talking about Black students. This is how far we've come. I think there's a certain, I think without knowing, there's a certain degree of division now that did not exist, would not exist when I was a student there.

MATTHIAS: Why would you think that division is here now versus it wouldn't have been happening there? Do you think is just due to a lack of numbers in the Black community?

THIBODEAUX: I think if there is a division, it's because there is a larger degree of interest, diverse interest among members of the Black student population than there was when I was there. You've got, and I think there's a sense sometimes that, I made this on my own, and I did not, I'm not here because of the struggles of my predecessors.

We stand on the shoulders of giants and sometimes a midget who stands on the shoulder of the giant, it's supposed to see farther than that giant. So you're supposed to go one step farther than I did. We've got students there who parents and grandparents have been very successful and I think that perhaps rather than creating solidarity, its creating division. And it's an artificial division and you going to learn that once they graduate because it will be right in the face.

I'm telling you. I'm happy that they are very successful. I am happy that their parents and grandparents are successful. But they have to understand that there was, you simply didn't do that overnight.

I always, when I talk to students today, they're interested in sports, so I tell them, you know LeBron James didn't jump out his mother's womb dribbling a basketball. You can't have the crops, without

plowing up the ground. Something had to have happened to put you in a position you are today. The position which allowed you to be where you are because your parents were successful, your grandparents were successful. You didn't make this on your own. And if you believe that, you're in for big disappointment later on in life.

MATTHIAS: Besides your dorm where else did you and your Black friends or just Black students in general hang out on campus?

THIBODEAUX: We hanged out at the Afro-American Society, Cutter, the Shabazz building. I'm not sure if still named that, but that's where we hung out. There, or in the football stands on Saturday afternoons, or in the Student Center. Those three primary places. Or in somebody's dorm room. Depend on who had the most jazz records, who was closest to the gymnasium, who is closest to the stadium?

MATTHIAS: Speaking of jazz.

THIBODEAUX: Yes

MATTHIAS: How would you describe the effect of the 1970s on music or what effect did music have on the 1970s?

THIBODEAUX: The Impressions, "People Get Ready;" to Nina Simone, "To be Young, Gifted, and Black." Those kinds of artists. Aretha Franklin's "Respect." James Brown "Say it Loud I'm Black and I'm proud." It gave us a sense of identity and a sense of consciousness. I remember my roommate use have these big speakers and put them in the window of our dorm on Saturday afternoons, just before the football game, because we have several of our schoolmates on the football team so we went to cheer them on. Unlike the huge tailgate party you see on ESPN on Saturday, we had small tailgate party.

We had limousine whatever you call that for the tailgaters. Frank would put these big speakers in the window of our dorm, we were on the second floor, and blast out the Impressions. Blast out James Brown, blast out the Temptations and the Miracles. We call those revolutions songs. And it kind of shaped, it kind of shaped our aspirations and it kinda shaped our desire to be like them, but in a different arena. I can't sing. I played the clarinet and saxophone but I couldn't have that exposure that music had at that time. So it invigorated us to go out and do those revolutionary things that they were talking about. And at the same time, it gave

us, because we were in this society, it gave us a greater appreciation of Black music.

We had two professors from Yale who are visiting professors, Willie Ruff and Dwiki Mitchell [Spelling unconfirmed] who taught a course on jazz appreciation. That was very popular among all students not just Black students. But our treat was that Dizzy Gillespie was a guest lecturer for two weeks.

Dizzy wore two leather outfits. One brown and one black. He alternated [laughter]. One class he had a black leather suit and the next class he had a brown leather suit. It gave us an appreciation of that kind of music. Music that many of us had not been exposed to before. And so that was the music of the time. It was music of liberation.

MATTHIAS: How would you describe the music of this generation?

THIBODEAUX: It's not music its noise [laughter]. It's noise. It's noise. In 1965 Temptations came up with a song that was written by Smokey Robinson called "My Girl." 'Talking about my girl, my girl' [Sings] Everybody sings that. All generations sing that. All races sing that. "I've got sunshine on a cloudy day." [Sings] My high school band played that and it's still very popular today. You name me one rap song that's going to be popular 55, 60 years from now. Not one and you know that. I know you probably like. Hip hop is fine, rap is not. I'm not sure if that how impactful that music is going to be today. It's more enjoyable to your generation than it is to mine.

But the music of my generation had an impact. I don't think this music will have an impact. I don't think that in the history of music or music annals that you're going to hear something about Snoop Doggy Dogg like that. I'm telling, or about Mr. Thug. I may be wrong, I maybe devaluing that music, but I don't see a whole bunch of value in that. I didn't grow up in that kind of generation. I didn't grow up with iPads and computers and Zoom. It's hard to adapt to because you're enveloped by it. You have to do it. You can't escape it. It's all around you. I don't think that music will be impactful as the music that I grew up with and I think music historians will tell you that.

Wynton Marsalis who runs the Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York, and this is Coca Cola club that kind of music will last forever. John Coltrane will last forever. Miles Davis will last forever. Jimmy Smith will last forever. Nestor Young, Ella Fitzgerald, those folks will last forever. Those artists today will not last forever. Although

you understand the music, you really appreciate it, you are certainly not attracted to it. You disagree, I bet you disagree.

MATTHIAS: How would you describe that shift from music of your day to the noise of my day?

THIBODEAUX: [Laughter] It's noisy music. I think it just a lack of musical history. I really, really do. [Pause]. I like easy listening jazz, Wynton Marsalis and those folks who play that. The Kenny Gs of the world. They're very, they're very technically educated in music. They just didn't pick up an instrument and started playing, they know music. They know how to compose music. They know how to write music.

But for commercial purposes, you can' play the classical jazz of [Charles]Mingus, of Davis, and of those people, because you were not going to make any money. And so the Kenny Gs of the world will play what folks will respond to and what audiences respond to I do. Otherwise, you will be playing in an empty room and you'll be broke. I understand that, so it mostly as opposed to music just for the sake of musical appreciation, it's become more monetized. It's become more commercialized, and I understand that different I mean how many kids will listen to those most musicians that have just that I just named, not many.

MATTHIAS: How would you describe—

THIBODEAUX: Listen to Drake and Lil Wayne and those kinds of artists. Aretha Franklin will last forever.

MATTHIAS: She sure will. She will last forever. But how would you describe your first day on campus?

THIBODEAUX: The first date?

MATTHIAS: Your first day like. [Laughter]

MATTHIAS: How would you describe your first day on campus?

THIBODEAUX: Wow what is it? My sister, my brother-in-law was a military guy for Dix New Jersey, so I stopped there on the way here and all my belongings were in a trunk. The truck was lost in route from Louisiana to New Jersey. So my sister, and I had to go shopping that day. I had nothing except the clothes on my back. We did our shopping. We had enough for clothes me to last for a year on campus. That day they dropped me off like at nine o'clock at night

and it was dark. I didn't know anything. I found my room and I went into my room and the next day was, the first person I met was Peter Lance [class of 71] from Harlem New York.

THIBODEAUX: Peter was, I saw him in a black suit, he was very sophisticated. Tell me where we're from, and I said where we was from. Peter went on to Berkeley law school and then drowned while in law school. But he was the first gentleman, first person, Black or white, that I met on campus and it was fortuitous and faithful because oh my God Okay, I have some company. I have some company now. I was lost, I felt like paradise lost. Where am I? Where are these mountains and all these colorful trees? And so it was frightening. It was intimidating.

It was like you're out. The ship sailing at sea without any without any direction. And it wasn't simply a, you're in a new place, new geography, new venue. It wasn't that. I knew that. But it was, at that time I haven't been in that physical environment, nor at that time have I been in that kind of cultural or intellectual environment. But having run into Peter Lance made me feel much more comfortable and at the same time it made me think my God did I make the right decision? Should I be at Xavier now as opposed to this campus? I had some doubts. I had some serious, serious doubts. It wasn't just about being homesick. Was this really what I bargained for this? Was this for me? You had to really adjust quickly. Really quickly to that kind, to those kinds of environments.

MATTHIAS: And how would you compare that day to your last day on campus? The day you graduated. How would you compare it?

THIBODEAUX: I got this. I was much more comfortable at navigating four years of that kind of Dartmouth experience. I made friends of all races. I was out to conquer the world. I felt that I could be a mentor to other incoming students and that's why I took the job of an assistant to the dean, because I felt that I could lessen some of the barriers, some of the hurdles that I knew I had to go through.

And it helped. Some students, nobody really get used to that kind of environment Junelle, and so I felt that I had navigated well enough to at least guide them through that, particularly incoming freshmen. Both Black and white, particularly Black students. I could empathize with them.

MATTHIAS: Would you say you serve as a mentor to the younger student body, then?

THIBODEAUX: That's a good time, yes. And you know I didn't want them to come feeling disillusion or, that they couldn't compete and by the same token, I did not want them feeling that they could not take this seriously. You've got to take this seriously. I don't care what kind of background you come from, what sort of academic preparation you had. This is going to be challenging, so I don't want you to come in here, thinking that and with an inflated ego, because the ego will be pierced and deflated quickly. It made me humble because I had done well academically throughout my life, but when confronted with these environments at Dartmouth, everybody did well. Everybody was smart. You're not the only smart guy in the world.

[unintelligible] average student among the student population, so I wanted to tell them look, you're going to leave here, and you're doing your first year with a sense of humility, that you're not such a primadonna that you thought you were, which is a good lesson.

MATTHIAS: In 1971, right after you graduated the Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, how did this influence or impact the political climate, you were in?

THIBODEAUX: In '72 I was on campus. I think in '72 Title IX was enacted. The Civil Rights Bill was amended to include a discrimination, gender discrimination. It certainly made me feel more comfortable that we were going to get to where we supposed to be in this society, both from a local, state, national level and on a campus level. So, it gave us hope. It gave us what President Obama talked about a lot and that was hope against adversity.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned that—

THIBODEAUX: And then it made me want to be even more active has a civil rights attorney.

MATTHIAS: And how did yo—

THIBODEAUX: It made me want to be a lawyer. It made me decide that I'm going to be a lawyer.

MATTHIAS: And how did you decide on Tulane law school to become a lawyer?

THIBODEAUX: I was tired of the Northeast. I was tired of the cold weather. I was tired of the pretentiousness of part of that environment, so I said I am getting out of here. I'm coming South either to UVA [University

of Virginia] or to Tulane. And I went to practice law in Louisiana. Tulane was the perfect place.

MATTHIAS: And what was practicing law like for the first time?

THIBODEAUX: It was challenging but I knew it was something that I wanted to do. And that easily evolved into that sort of thing. I started off with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York City with Jack Greenberg whose predecessor was Thurgood Marshall and I became emersed in civil rights litigation and constitutional litigation. I accompanied lawyers. I did not try any cases. I didn't know how to try case, but I coveted lawyers who did around the country and it instilled in me a greater sense of involvement, a great sense of responsibility in doing that kind of work.

When I came home, I had a salary from the Legal Defense Fund and I obtained a job as the first Black assistant DA, district attorney, in my area. I was allowed to practice and my family members, were here. People knew me, so it was a good ride financially. And I said wow this is really good. And as I told you before, you really you can't do good unless you do well. You can't help if you're struggling, so I avoided that.

THIBODEAUX: I remember the first seven years from time I came back. I tried my first capital murder case defending, no I was not a prosecutor then, I was defending. A black guy in Lake Charles kill a white cop. That's not good. I needed to pick a jury that was not going to be prejudiced against you, and then we want an acquittal. We want an acquittal based on self-defense. That really brought me a lot of visibility and a lot of business, and it wasn't just defending a guy, getting him off on a technicality. He really was innocent. That's a scary part. You're defending somebody you know is innocent, just not guilty. There was no attempt to murder, no attempt to murder. It was self-defense.

The first case I ever signed off on as a lawyer went to the United US Supreme Court, and we won nine zip unanimously. It involved the first amendment issue and I did that with the assistance of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York. We argued on the date that President Reagan was shot in March 30, 1981. I was five years out of law school, six years it was a great experience for me.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned values of community, hard work, race and just creating unity. How did those values that you learned from Dartmouth, your values growing up with your siblings' factor into you being a judge and just practicing law?

THIBODEAUX: I knew, I didn't have to learn, judges sometimes, their voice, attitude, sometimes it's fair, you know you want to be impartial. I already knew that. I knew that. I had lived that kind of experience and you bring that kind of experience to the bench. It is not something where okay, am I doing the right thing. I know when I'm doing the right thing, because of my past experiences.

The Sankofa bird of West Africa sees backward while it flies forward. It knows where it's going because it knows where it's been. I felt like the Sankofa bird. I know where I'm going, because I know where I've been, and so the idea of being a judge and being fair to people was easy to me. It came naturally because that's what I did as a civil rights lawyer. That's what I did as a criminal defense lawyer. That's what I did as a personal injury lawyer. They're getting money from people, where an insurance company would otherwise screw them. I didn't let that happen under my watch. It's very easy for me to do. I enjoyed doing it.

MATTHIAS: Can you tell me a little bit more about your experience working as the first Black DA at the time?

THIBODEAUX: I made the front page of the paper. Let me tell you, we have got a long way to go Junelle, but we have come a long way as well. Now it's unusual not to have Black prosecutors. It's just a common thing now. It wasn't that common a thing back in 1976 in the deep South and in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

It gave me an idea of how to treat people fairly. It made me know that real prosecuting is not about winning cases. Sure you like to win. I never lost a case as a prosecutor. I didn't go to trial if I thought it couldn't win it. But it gave you a sense of, okay, am I doing the right thing? Am I doing this thing called justice? Is this position report really correct? Are you sure this is correct report? And then the next day you get a supplemental report which is a contradiction to first report.

You knew that this report, the first report was made up into a lie. You knew that. You knew as a private practitioner, and, as a lawyer and as a judge you knew about the fallacies of the criminal justice system. You knew intimately how it worked inside out. It gave you not just a theoretical sense of okay what are the cases like? What are the precedents like? But it gave you a real sense of this doesn't look good, of this doesn't sound good.

THIBODEAUX: I know this cop is lying. Or, by the same token, I know this defendant lying. This is a story that was made up. Let me give an example. I was an appeal court judge. I was never it a trial judge. As an appeal court judge, you're supposed to give a lot of deference, not a credibility to what the trial court has found because our court sees the witnesses, sees the demeanor of the witnesses on the stand, sees their movements and is able to process that.

A guy gets hit in the head with a boom. This is a fishing, an industrial area, but it's also that the fishing industry is very big in Southwest Louisiana because of all of the water. Boom hits him in the head. He suffers disabling injuries. His coworkers say that they didn't see it, or no, it didn't happen. Why? Because in the fishing industry if you go with an accident-free season, you get a bonus. They were tempted to say oh, nothing happened. I didn't see that. It goes to trial, and they change their story. Of course, they're not burdened by the employer or employees. They are not working for this company anymore, so now they're free to tell what really happened, and they didn't know this guy, so they what had really happened.

THIBODEAUX: The trial judge ruled against this guy. He said in his ruling, that "I don't believe Mr. Thomas because he had to be subpoenaed to come the Court." That's normal. And "I don't believe Mr. Williams, because he's on government assistance, that's welfare". Both of these guys were poor. So he ruled against them. When it comes to us on appeal is very difficult to overcome those credibility determinations. It's hard, you are not there. You are reading a cold record on appeal. Black words on white Paper.

The captain of that boat testified, and the first mate testified and the trial judge believed the captain and the first mate. I know, coming from Louisiana and coming from not very far from the Gulf of Mexico, that on a fishing boat always the captain is white. Always the first mate is white. Always the workers are Black. So what happened was he really believed the white captain and first mate because of their race and disbelieved the Black witnesses. So, we overturned on appeal because it wasn't in the record, but I know that from my experience, and this is the fair thing to do.

My experience taught me that, and from a criminal standpoint as a judge I knew pretty much that given what happened, this is an excessive sentence for what happened. So how do you correct them? You find creative ways to correct that sort of thing.

THIBODEAUX: In a worker's compensation area, my dad work as a common laborer. You miss one check and you're in trouble. You lived from one check, one payday to the other, so I was very conscious of workers compensation cases and workers compensation injuries. I was very conscious and very aware that sometimes insurance companies will not do the right thing.

My wife is a State Farm insurance agent and we don't talk too much about those things. So I am aware that people who are injured will work while injured because they can't afford to miss a check. I am also aware that how important this area of the law is. I was very sympathetic to that area of law because I knew my dad was a laborer. He worked with his hands every day. We can't afford to miss a check. So, I was not very sympathetic to those employers and those insurance companies that refused or failed to pay the appropriate workers compensation benefits. Those are things that I brought to the bench because of my experiences at Dartmouth and because of my experiences as a practicing attorney for 17 years before I became a judge.

MATTHIAS: Speaking of Dartmouth, how would you describe the Title IX office?

THIBODEAUX: Well, we have very little interaction because remember this was 1967 through 1971 and Title IX was almost nonexistent. Women assault. What are you talking about? Should be in a home ec class. Softball no. Basketball no. We didn't have those programs those programs existed Junelle after I left the Dartmouth. And I think, it makes them a more inclusive society. It makes much more for a normal society to have those Title IX programs and, of course, in these times because of the pandemic those things were challenged because of schools.

The incomes of schools are not as they were before, and the net limit of those orders are greater than they were. So something's got to give. So what do you do? You give women's tennis that doesn't generate a whole bunch of money, do you give up women's soccer? Do you give up women softball? Because those are not income generating. Those are not revenue streams and you keep men's football and basketball? Where's the balance? Because of Title IX you're going to be very careful about those things.

They're going to have equity and they going to have parody. And so college administrators, private employers have to be very conscious of those things as well. So I think that was a really great

addition. There wasn't a James Brown saying it's a man world now. Not anymore.

MATTHIAS: Speaking of you mentioned that you met your wife, your wife is from Xavier. How did you meet?

THIBODEAUX: I was practicing law here in Lake Charles and she was working as an engineer for the phone company. It was a cold day, unusual for Louisiana, and so my law partner saw her and offered inside for a cup of coffee. He said I've got someone that you need to meet and he introduced us that day. She came in for a cup of coffee and I drank a cup of coffee. I was not a coffee drinker. It made me sick. [laughter] But it was it was a good sickness and I was feeling badly because of my allergies. Within the next couple of nights we had a date, even though I wasn't feeling well. It was just fortuitous that she was planning fiber optics around my law office on a cold winter day and my law partner decided to introduce her to me, under the guise of coming in for a cup of coffee because it's a cold day.

MATTHIAS: How was that dynamic like —

THIBODEAUX: I wasn't considering Xavier because she went Xavier and graduated doing the same year. I did not even know her in high school. She went to a little ritzy Catholic school across town and I went to public high school.

MATTHIAS: That's crazy. You mentioned that she does State Farm Insurance. How does the arguments conflict when practicing in your law and your technique versus what she does for a living? How does that work out?

THIBODEAUX: It's a mutual company so its employee own. She sells the policies. She's not an adjuster that adjusts damages. She just sends those over. It's something that we don't talk about too often. When I was on the bench, I wasn't a big fan of State Farm and they particularly liked my decisions. Even though, knowing that my wife was a State Farm agent, you would think that oh they would ask to recuse. They would be fortunate that I would be on a case involving State Farm because my wife is a State Farm agent and so no they were not. I was not a fan of State Farm and they were not fan of me. It was [inaudible]. Even today my law firm has over 650 hurricane related cases, half of which are against State Farm. We call the company Snake Farm as opposed to State Farm. She doesn't care. She believes more in fairness than she does in being

obligated to a particular entity. So, no It does not create problems at all.

MATTHIAS: That's interesting. Another Question. You said own three charter schools. Can you speak more about what played into your decision of opening those schools and do you foresee yourself opening more?

THIBODEAUX: I told you that I taught as part of Tucker Foundation program while at Dartmouth, and that me more interested in education. Education existed I think for the purpose of closing the equity gap. Closing the income gap. Closing the educational gaps that exist in our society. I was part of a group called the Hundred Black Men of Metro Lake Charles.

One of our purposes was to go out and talk about leadership to various students in our area and to create opportunities for mentorship and to create and knowledge of economic equality and entrepreneurship. We would go out, once a week for half an hour and select a school and we really weren't having an impact, not an systemic impact.

Many of the students were there because their teachers told them to. Many of the principals allowed us to go, because of who we were and not because they were interested in what we had to say. After a while we thought, you know what I think we're wasting our time. We're not having an impact, the systemic impact that we think we are having, so let's be honest with ourselves.

THIBODEAUX: I explored ways to have a greater impact, using the same amount of energy. I thought about opening a charter school. We have, I think approximately, about 53 public schools in this Parish. That includes pre-K through eight and high school. Of the 53, 16 were failing or underperforming. All of them had at least an 85% Black population. That's not coincidental. For every failing or underperformance school in the parish, which would you call county, we're back. So I say this can't be.

In our system, one has to go to the school where you are zoned. It's a neighborhood school. I could not go to school or to a better performing school out of the zone. If I had been growing up in Lake Charles at the time. We established schools in 2010, my elementary school would have been an F school. My middle school would have been a D school. My high school would have been a D school. I am stuck in this zipcode, and I can't get out of it.

THIBODEAUX: A Charter school can accept applicants from the entire state if it wishes to. So I decided lets form a charter school where parents have a choice of where they can send their children. Where parents have a great voice in school matters, and where we are not beholden to the bureaucratic ways of the local school board. That's the reason that I started that. I think we have a greater chance of overcoming what I call the equity gap than we do in traditional high schools.

America is the only place where billions of dollars are spent on a business, the business of education and it's a failure. No, it would not allow any other business to spend that kind of money and fail. We do more with less.

We have three charter schools. We have two pre-K through eight. We had exceeded our enrollment of 850 because of the hurricanes and because of covid. We have an average population of 800 in the pre-K through and we have 550 in the high school. We're educating approximately 2100 kids in our three charter schools, where we govern ourselves. We make rules and we don't have to be beholden to the bureaucracy of the of the traditional system. Let me give just a small example.

THIBODEAUX: We had a meeting a school board meeting, and we are the school board. We are the school board for three schools. Our principal says, I need something called prometean boards. What the prometean boards? I didn't know. She explained what a prometean board was and we need some computers. We took her from the traditional public school system where she would have had to go through her supervisor, the supervisor had to go through his supervisor, and that supervisor had to go through assistant principal, an assistant principle. the assistant superintendent.

That would have taken three or four months. I asked how much does that cost? She says like \$88,000. We looked at the budget and said oh we can afford that. In 10 minutes, she had what she needed to educate these kids as opposed to waiting three or four months.

Our school population generate consist of about 85% Black and the rest white or Hispanic. Eighty-two percent of whom are eligible for free lunch, free breakfast programs. Everybody gets to eat free. They were succeeding. The school was not succeeding. The schools were failing them. Same students, same parents, same

zip code, same address. How come they reach success our schools? That's why I started the schools. To give them the same advantage that I had growing up.

MATTHIAS: That's wonderful, and how would you compare your school, your high school and your classmates back then, who didn't have those same resources that my generation would have today?

THIBODEAUX: They were more committed, and we had a better education. The average Black high schooler in Louisiana reads at about a fifth-grade level because they were in public schools where there's tenure. You stay in that school for three to five years then you move on to better schools. Or you stay in that school if you're an underperforming teacher. They can't get rid of you because you're tenured. When I was in high school we had teachers, many of whom were male who are committed, who were very bright. We had the best of the best. Why? Because they couldn't go to law school. They couldn't go to engineering school. They couldn't go to medical school. They graduated with education degrees and came to teach me, so I think we were getting a better education, then, then the present seniors today.

MATTHIAS: You mentioned so much about teaching in all your experiences. Have you ever thought for a moment that maybe you want to do teaching full time instead of lawyer?

THIBODEAUX: Yeah, I did, but I decided that's too hard. Teaching is very difficult. It's hard and two I can lecture as a lawyer, and I can make a better living. I can do what I want to do from a social, political, civic standpoint and make more money than a teacher can make. Ask my teachers today. It's a difficult profession, particularly dealing with the kids of today. They are not as well-behaved, and they are not as respectful as we were [laughter]. I thought about that a lot of times.

I think because of my empathetic nature, I could have been a very good teacher. It's very inspiring to see teachers teach and I keep a saying in my desk drawer. Every day I look at it [removes from drawer]. It's by Frederick Douglass. It said, "it's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." It's so much easier to build young boys and girls than is to repair broken men and women. And that's what education should be all about. That's what our schools aspire to be and I think we're accomplishing that.

MATTHIAS: And, given that what, in your time at Dartmouth, what would you say or think would need to be changed at Dartmouth, given your focus on education and inclusiveness?

THIBODEAUX: There should be more of a pragmatic approach to dealing with societal issues. You're an academic institution and you're being taught a lot of concepts and a lot of theories. How do you put that in practice? I think that Dartmouth, and all higher education institutions should look at the more pragmatic aspects of dealing with society. I think it's a social responsibility. They should think about that.

You shouldn't just identify what the problems are. How do you deal with that? How do you create institutions, concrete institutions, to deal with what you think are these social, economic and civic problems? So develop more pragmatic approach. I think, students ought to be thinking about that. I've talked and I've rapped and I have done all of this, so what are you going to do about it?

It's like Booker T Washington said. It's not what you think, know what you say. It's what you do that's going to define you. That the essence of who you are is what you do. You think to yourself, well I don't know what to do. No, you don't. That's why the school's ought to give you some ideas of pragmatism. How do I developed programs to deal with the economic gap? To deal with the income gap, to deal with education gap. What's some program that can be developed? How do you help me develop those programs or give me some ideas on what to do? That's what I think's all these institutions should be about.

MATTHIAS: And if you could give advice to the Black students at Dartmouth today, what other advice would you give them?

THIBODEAUX: Besides being pragmatic [pause]. Enjoy life. Enjoy life. Don't wait until your golden years to try to enjoy those things that you've accumulated all of your younger years because by that time you do not have the energy to do so, nor the willingness to do so. Life is made of memories not material things. I'm not telling you to not enjoy or to get those material things. You got sneakers going for 600 bucks these days, golden goose [Canada Goose] [laughter], Versace's. Accumulate those things. Accumulate the Jaguars, the BMW's, but also make sure that your life is filled with good memories and don't wait until your golden years to start enjoying those things that you've been able to accumulate.

Make life happier. Make life more productive. A happy person is a productive person. Why should a 25-year-old not engage in pursuing his or her dreams and take a job, where it may be financially inviting but you hate it? Take your chances while you're young. You're gonna make mistakes, but you're young enough to overcome those mistakes so take those chances.

MATTHIAS: That is true. Thank you so much for your time and thoughtful considerations. That has been impactful.

THIBODEAUX: Okay Junelle it was a pleasure talking to you, and I wish you the best.