

## **Interview with Theresa Faith Cummings**

**November 7, 2007**

**Interviewer: Barbara Dickerman**

Dickerman: Good afternoon, Theresa. Now we're in Theresa Cummings' home on November the seventh. And I'll start asking her questions about how long her family has been in Springfield. How many generations, Theresa?

Cummings: On my mother's side, five generations, and on my father's side, six including Caitlin and Ferris.

Dickerman: And tell me more about how they came to be in Springfield, and – I know you started with your mother's side, what they did and how they got together.

Cummings: OK. My great-great-grandfather came, he was recruited to come up to be a supervisor at Peabody mine. And at that time, the coal-mining, each mine was racially divided. There was one for Afro-Americans, one for Italians, one for Germans. And they were all working for Peabody but they never worked together. And he married my mother's mother here, and then my mother was born here in Springfield. And then my grandfather, which is my mother's father, was recruited by our great-grandfather from Kentucky to come up to work in the mines. And when he married my mother's mother, Luella, and his name was Irvine. On my mother's side, their names were Barry. And my mother had three sisters and one brother. Then they lived, and my great-grandfather eventually owned land from Cook to Kansas, at Eighteenth Street back to the railroad. Then we were told that he gave the land from Cass to – I'm not sure of that street. But anyway, he gave three blocks of land to Pleasant Grove Church, and the church still stands on it. My grandparents and great-grandparents on my father's side lived on Canedy, West Canedy. My great-grandfather was a bricklayer, and he had his own company, and the brick streets and buildings on Seventh Street here in Springfield were all laid by his company. My grandmother, which was my father's mother, went to Hay-Edwards, and at that time it was called Hay and Edwards, it was separated, and she went to school there, and her sisters and brothers all went to Hay-Edwards. And my dad's mother married our grandfather, who is from Evansville Indiana, and he was a chemist, and he worked at Staley's in Decatur. And he also had his own business as a wallpaper hanger. So both of my grandparents – on both sides, grandparents were business owners. And I think that's why we sort of lean towards having our own business and things of that sort.

Dickerman: That's great. That is very interesting. And they lived on Canedy, and then they also lived on the east side too?

- Cummings: No, my mother's family lived on the east side, and owned the land that I talked about, from Cook to Cass, or that next block – not Cass, but the next block south of Clay Street, south of where Pleasant Grove is now, I'm not sure of the street. My dad's family all lived on Canedy, in that area. They owned the land there. In fact, that land is still owned by my family. My brother in Wisconsin owns it now.
- Dickerman: Now, that brings us to the number of kids in your own family. As we've said, there are five – your great-nieces and nephews that live here now are the fifth generation of your family, but think about your brothers and sisters, describe that side of the family.
- Cummings: We had – I've got to count. Nelson, Virgil, Hugh... We had five brothers, and I have a sister. And right now, there's only three of us. My brother that lives in Madison, Wisconsin, my sister who lives here in Springfield, and myself.
- Dickerman: And the neighborhood, where did you live as a child, and kind of describe a little bit about the neighborhood and what you did for fun, and maybe other kids that you played with, but maybe they wouldn't come to mind.
- Cummings: Well, we didn't move very far from where my grandparents lived, because we lived on Williams Street, so we didn't move too far. And we all went to Hay-Edwards and Springfield High School, my mother went to Springfield High School, so we all sort of stayed in the same area. And I was having brothers and a sister, we sort of entertained each other, or entertained ourselves. We were all in Scouts, and my brothers were in sports, and my sister and I, we were in Scouts and piano lessons and things of that sort. And we've always been individually able to entertain ourselves, so we never have really gone out to – we've had friends and dealt with them, but it's never been something that we couldn't do by ourselves.
- Dickerman: I know of your closeness, I've always observed it among your brothers, the ones that I knew, at your Christmas party particularly is a tradition. We won't go into that quite yet. And the church that you attended as a child and probably still do?
- Cummings: Saint Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, and still a member.
- Dickerman: Okay. Can you say a little bit about the minister at that time? Do you recall?
- Cummings: In our church, the ministers are assigned by the Bishop. I sort of remember one of our ministers, because his son used to come over to our house and eat almost every day, because he didn't have any sisters or

brothers, and so his parents liked for him to come over there, because therefore, he was in a family. And so his father became Presiding Elder, William Stewart. But the rest of the ministers, growing up, they were just our minister. And by our bishop changing our ministers, we've had several ministers at Saint Paul.

Dickerman: So then you graduated from Springfield High School and then went on to college, and I think I know but I'm going to let you say where you went to college.

Cummings: I went to the University of Illinois first, and then I graduated from Winston-Salem, University of Winston-Salem State Teachers College. And then I got my graduate degree from Southern Illinois University. And then I was enrolled in Washington University in Saint Louis in law, but then I dropped out and came to Springfield to work. And when you're in law school, if you don't go straight through, you have to start all over, so I've never gotten back to it.

Dickerman: And this is way back – you just kept on, as you got out of college and got the Master's degree, you went right on to law school, or did you sort of work in between?

Cummings: I was teaching at the time.

Dickerman: That was your first job, is teaching.

Cummings: Right. That's the first job I had.

Dickerman: Where, and what grades, or whatever?

Cummings: My first job teaching was in Saint Louis, in the public school system. And I taught fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, at different times. And I taught school for about eight years.

Dickerman: In Saint Louis. You didn't come back and teach in Springfield.

Cummings: No. That was interesting, at that time, the school system here was just astonished to have a black teacher, and when I was interviewed, because my parents wanted me to work here, and I was interviewed by the superintendent, and instead of him looking at my qualifications, he wanted to know if I was going to have some children soon, or if I was going to continue to teach. And I thought at that time, I knew that was not a question that he legally should ask, and I told him it was none of his business. So you know, I was not hired. And then one of my father's friends who was Caucasian, his daughter was teaching, and he told him

that if your daughter teaches, I'm going to have my daughter quit. So that just shows you how Springfield still was at that time.

Dickerman: And that would have been in the late forties, probably?

Cummings: No, it was in the sixties.

Dickerman: In the sixties. Were there any black teachers in the school system at that time?

Cummings: I think Mrs. Hammonds and maybe Mrs. Rountree had started, I'm not sure. But I was single, the black teachers that were teaching were married.

Dickerman: That's an interesting comment. It certainly is. So then what took you – made you kind of – what job did you get after you didn't get the teaching job in Springfield? You decided to stay here?

Cummings: No, I went back to graduate school, the University of Illinois. And then the instructors there told me that in graduate school, you needed some experience, that you shouldn't just read textbooks and read other books and rewrite them and turn them in for papers and things. So that's when I took the National Teachers Exam, and the closest place at that time that was hiring was Saint Louis. I did not apply for a job in Saint Louis, but that was the closest place. And after I took the test, my score was that they offered me a job in the middle of the year. In fact, they offered me a job in April, so that I would come back and teach there in September.

Dickerman: In Saint Louis.

Cummings: Yes.

Dickerman: And you had taught there before, before you came.

Cummings: No.

Dickerman: Oh, I see. So you did come back to teach in Saint Louis.

Cummings: No. I only went to Saint Louis to teach after I went to University of Illinois to graduate school, and the instructors told me I needed some experience. Then I took the National Teachers Exam. But when I first graduated, I went here to the superintendent to get a job. And that's when I had that negative experience, so I knew I wasn't going to teach here. And the closest place at that time was Saint Louis, and they automatically offered me a job.

Dickerman: So did you enjoy Saint Louis? Did you have an apartment of your own, or...

Cummings: Yes, I had an apartment of my own. It was a new experience. A challenging experience. The school system was quite different than what I had grown up here in Springfield. I adjusted to it. The main concern that I had was the teachers were not as dedicated as I felt that they should be, and of course, I didn't have any family or anybody down there, so I could spend a lot of time with the children and do a lot of extra things. And some of the teachers sort of resented that. But I decided the children needed a lot of other things, in order to make them better students in school. So I was going to work for the Community Development Corporation in Saint Louis. And when some of the people who were on the board for the Community Action Agency here in Springfield found out that I was going to do that, then they said I should come up here and work for the one here, because Saint Louis had a lot to pick from. And that's how I ended up here. I was only supposed to be here two years.

Dickerman: I see. And you established the Neighborhood Center, or was that established before you came back?

Cummings: No, I came here just to establish the Neighborhood Center, so I was going to be here a couple of years. Because my mother felt that from our previous experiences here, growing up as children, that people would never treat me as an adult. They'd always want to treat me as Nelson's daughter or Mary's daughter, or, "I remember when you were in Sunday School," or this, that, and the other. So my parents felt that I would not be able to be successful here. So they really didn't want me to work here, and I was only going to work two or three years and establish it and leave.

Dickerman: But that didn't work out that way. Did you live at home then when you came back with your parents?

Cummings: I did at first. And then that was another experience, finding an apartment here in Springfield. And I filed a lot of suits with the Human Rights Commission here in Springfield, because I went to see about different apartments, and then they would be advertised, but then when I got there, all of the sudden they were filled. And some of the apartment buildings weren't even completed, but they were all of the sudden filled, and I, at that time, I was not successful with the Human Relations Commission, but as I worked here longer, and got to see what was going on, people were acting in order to keep their job more so than that there were facts there about the apartment, where people had not agreed.

Dickerman: Oh, I don't quite see that. They were doing what to keep their job?

Cummings: They were saying that this landlord or that landlord wasn't discriminating, because of some of the landlords had a big piece of the action here in Springfield.

Dickerman: And we certainly know that.

Cummings: Yes, very much so.

Dickerman: So this was what I would call the beginning of the long saga of the interesting things that you did at that Neighborhood Center, which I had just begun to get involved in a little bit at that time. You had probably been there a couple of years.

Cummings: Not really, because when I came to the Neighborhood Center, we developed the programs, and a lot of you and Lynn Alterfer and Peg Blaser, a lot of you were League of Women Voters. And I joined the League at that time, and so a lot of things that we started doing in the neighborhood, trying out to see about housing, one of the other major projects was to find out the cost of food on one side of Springfield versus the other, and voter registration. All of those things became a part of the Neighborhood Center, and working to get the breakfast program in the schools, and the housing program that gave the money at the end to--- Habitat for Humanity, but that other housing program that was before Habitat. Community Action had some money, because we had gotten it, and we gave it to the other group to build the houses.

Dickerman: What did you find out about the cost of groceries at different sides of town?

Cummings: It was terrible. The people in the low-income neighborhoods, certain meats that they thought the low-income people would buy, were more expensive in their neighborhoods than they were in the other neighborhoods.

Dickerman: That was an interesting experiment. Well, I'm thinking of some of the personalities that worked for you, and you might talk about any ones that you can think of, but I certainly think they were interesting, wonderful people. Starting with whom?

Cummings: Oh, there's so many different ones that worked there. They all had their own personalities and their own areas, but I will say the connecting link for all of them, they were dedicated employees. And they really wanted to make other persons' lives better.

Dickerman: And do you want to name them, so that for posterity, that we could remember them?

Cummings: Well, there's Edna Gardner, Jack Pettiford, Al Harris, Mrs. Allen, I can't remember her first name.

Dickerman: Was that Della?

Cummings: Della Allen. Della Allen. There were – Pat Shriner. Effie Tennant, Lynnette Tennant. We had several persons that we invited just recently, Barbara Alexander, that we invited just recently, because people that see me off and on and wanted a community action reunion, we sent out all of these letters and all of these invitations to all of these folks, and very few of them showed up. Doris Chambers, Sister Mary Lamb. There were just a lot of people, and then we had conscientious board people, Gary Spears, and Loren Brown, who now is in a nursing home here in Springfield. Josephine Oblinger. Pendleton, who was a Journal-Register editor. There were just a lot of people who were board members and staff that made the Community Action [Agency] what it was.

Dickerman: And that was at Sixteenth and Capitol, wasn't it? The building.

Cummings: That's the Neighborhood Center.

Dickerman: The Neighborhood Center, that's what I'm thinking of. You were really director of more than just the Neighborhood Center then. And I'm not clear on that...

Cummings: No. When I came here, I came as director to set up and establish the Neighborhood Center. And the Neighborhood Center concept was to bring all of the different services into one building. Like we had people, state employees for mental health, from the Department of Children and Family Services, from different areas. And Public Aid, Public Health, and they would be there so many days a week and people that we were serving could come in and see them there, rather than having to go all over town to their offices. And then from the Neighborhood Center, I became the director of the Community Action Agency, and I really – a little concerned about that, because I had been with the Community Action Agency about two years, and we'd had six or seven directors, and I wasn't sure what was going on. But we ended up doing some things that were beneficial and helpful to the community, and some of what we started are still in existence now. We got a HUD grant, and built homes for senior citizens in Williamsville, Illiopolis, and Sherman. We got a grant which was the beginning of daycare for senior citizens over at Saint John's Hospital. We did the experimental program for breakfasts in the public school system. We started it just in Matheny, but now it's in all the schools. There was several programs that we started that are still in existence in other agencies. We did lead poisoning, and the League of Women Voters had a big part in helping us with that, with checking the

houses and going with the city health department to check the lead based paint that were in the homes for the people. So I think we made a contribution, and some people are still employed from jobs that we got for them. I see them off and on. They tell me, "I'm still employed where you got me a job, Miss C." Things of that sort. One lady introduced me to her children that were in Head Start that are graduating from college now. So it was a success, even though when I resigned, there was a lot of bad PR in the paper, because people didn't know, they thought I was running from something. But by me not leaving Springfield, they found out I wasn't.

Dickerman: And then it was moved to the old Feitshans High School at one point, wasn't it? So you wanted to have more space?

Cummings: We wanted to have more space, and we wanted to put all of the programs together. Because when we were on Tenth-and-a-Half Street, off of Ash, we couldn't put all of the programs there. And when we were at Matheny... no, I'm not sure of that school over on Moffat, I can't remember the name of it. We only had a few programs there, so they were scattered all over. But when we finished, we had programs in four counties outside of Sangamon County.

Dickerman: That's interesting. And when you name those people that worked there, staff, so many of them went on to other things, helping in other ways, I think, as far as I remember.

Cummings: Right. And some of them tell me right now, they got their training by working in community action and things of this sort, like Bill Logan, Mary Jane Forney. And of course everybody knows and sees Doris Chambers working very diligently with a group of children, and how she's adopted those children, because their parents are incarcerated, and she's trying to raise those girls, and they are doing superb.

Dickerman: And didn't Doris Chambers go on to law school? Or did she? Am I wrong?

Cummings: No, she didn't. No.

Dickerman: Someone else, mixed up. And Mary Jane Forney went from there to doing what?

Cummings: She was director over at Family Center Day Care, and now she works for the Department of Human Services.

Dickerman: I remember, and maybe I'm wrong, there was a project area council when they were going to do urban renewal. The federal government said they



had to have the project area council, and I think that they met in the old neighborhood center at Sixteenth and Capital, but am I right or wrong?

Cummings: That's correct. The Neighborhood Center was used by several groups for meetings.

Dickerman: Yes. You didn't have to initiate that; that was just something that they used the rooms.

Cummings: Right. They weren't charged anything, and it was centrally located, and people knew where it was.

Dickerman: So then we go on from community action, which in my mind, it was such a tremendous success, what I did know of it. Oh, you mentioned Bill Logan. Now, what did he go on to do after he left?

Cummings: Bill Logan has always been a community activist. He worked for Springfield Housing Authority. I'm not sure what other groups he worked for. I know he's on the park board. I'm not sure. It seems like he worked for another community department, but I'm not sure.

Dickerman: And so about what was the date that you left Community Action? Did it continue on? Was there another director? Was it closed, or...

Cummings: It did not continue on after I resigned. But state-wise, they were happy, because they had been fighting Springfield, and some of Springfield folks felt that they didn't have any poor people in Springfield anyway, and so a lot of the programs went to the county. The Head Start Program part of it went to the Urban League, and part of it went to the other counties, if they had Home Start and things. And the – oh, what is it – the nutrition program for children, the WIC Program, it went to the Urban League. But we were the first ones to have it.

Dickerman: Well, so then did you take a much-needed short vacation or something when you left, before you started your next phase of your career?

Cummings: Well, I did, I guess, take a needed rest, because working Community Action was a 24/7 job, because people thought they could call you anytime. And I really needed to change and get away, because it was deteriorating me, as my family said. So I didn't work for three or four years, and then I went into state government. I went in as the assistant director of the Abandoned Mines Reclamation Council, and I was over the day-by-day administrative part in personnel. And I had staff doing the Affirmative Action and those kinds of things. And then when Governor Edgar combined all of the natural resource programs into one, the Mines

and Minerals, Abandoned Mines. Not EPA, but every one except EPA. Then I was the chief EEO Officer for that department until I retired.

Dickerman: Oh, I'd forgotten what those jobs were. Let's see, we'll take a little break, maybe...

(Pause in Recording)

Dickerman: Theresa, whether you were retired or not, one of the things you were very famous for is your annual Christmas party. Tell us a little bit about that, and maybe some of the people that were part of it.

Cummings: Well, that's interesting, because every year I say I'm not going to do it. And so people tell me, "Well, we're looking forward, because that's the only time we see each other," things of this sort. There are people who I come in contact with, in organizations and groups, and my church, and things like that, that I invite. And some people have gotten accustomed to visiting with each other here. And I'm saying, Well, yes, I know – and I started putting time on it, because people were staying so late, but it was interesting last year, a couple people came around 8:30 or 9:00, and they said, "Well, we saw the cars out here, so we knew other people were here," and they left about 11:30. So, you know, but people say, "Well, people are having a good time. You should be glad." So they stay longer. But it's fun preparing for it, and I enjoy the people coming, and I just hope that it's been an enjoyable time for them.

Dickerman: Well, did cooking for that inspire you to do some catering in the last few years? Or how did you get started in the catering business? I don't know if that was before or after you retired.

Cummings: Oh, that was before. And one of the reasons I started doing cooking and baking was that every job that I've had, I've always had to depend on someone else bringing me this or bringing me that to complete a job. And so I looked at cooking as that I could start it and finish and have a finished product that I had done myself. And then when my father was living, and he lived with me, then every night, it gave me an opportunity to cook dinner, and do different things. It's like I tell people, you could have chicken two or three times, but it never has to be fixed the same way. And then I decided to do baking, Theresa's Kitchen, and I only use fresh vegetables and fruit, and I don't put any additives in – not additives, stuff to keep it long. I don't put those in there. Anyway, I don't put that in there. And so now, I do more baking in the fall and winter, so that the food can get different places and be still in good shape. So I'm getting ready now to make some green tomato bread and things, because my brother and nephew will be coming for Thanksgiving, and I always give

them some to take back with them, so they have it later on. So I've got to get back in the groove again.

Dickerman: So how many nieces and nephews do you have, Theresa?

Cummings: Let's see. I have four, six, three, that's nine, ten, twelve, fourteen – seventeen.

Dickerman: And then another project that you launched...

Cummings: That's great-nieces and others, and nephews.

Dickerman: I see. And then another thing you've got...

Cummings: But they all call me Aunt, so I had to take that.

Dickerman: Become involved in, in the last few years, you and your sisters are raising two of her grandchildren, I believe.

Cummings: Right. That's correct.

Dickerman: So how does that suit you? You're sharing the job.

Cummings: They are more than a job. They are very active, very active children. And my sister has them involved in a lot of things, they've just been involved in sculpture, they're both very artistic, and Ferris has been in a painting class, and Caitlin takes music, and so they do a lot of things. They're busy.

Dickerman: Did they start school in Springfield, or did they go to other schools before they came here?

Cummings: Let's see. Yes. They were in first grade and kindergarten, I think. But the rest of the time, they've been in school here.

Dickerman: And then your church, Theresa, is still the same church of your childhood, Saint Paul's?

Cummings: Yes.

Dickerman: And the kinds of things you might be involved in there at the church?

Cummings: Well, I'm involved with the trustee board, which is responsible for all the buildings and everything for the church, and any equipment or anything the church has. And then I'm doing some missionary, under the missionary title. I am doing things on the conference level, working with being the PME director, which is Promotional Educational Program

director on the conference level, which includes all of Illinois. And then on the connectional level, which is the Fourth Episcopal District, which includes Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Canada, and I'm the Underground Railroad chairperson for the committee there.

Dickerman: And what does that entail? Research or what?

Cummings: Yes, it entails research, having my committee make presentations and things at their conferences. Last year, we did displays on all the conferences, the members of my committee, which are from each of the different conferences. And passing out materials and things of that sort. The AME church has been very, very involved with the Underground Railroad.

Dickerman: All over the country, not just in Springfield. I know there was in Springfield and in Jacksonville.

Cummings: Right. It's all over the country. But each of the states have some involvement, but a lot of the AME churches all over the country, not in every city – excuse me, not every church, but they're scattered all over, and in Canada.

Dickerman: I was thinking, does any memorable – of your long career in Springfield, memorable characters come to mind, outstanding? I know that you have been named as one of the twelve women who changed Springfield by the public radio station. And I think that was very appropriate. But we all knew some characters, and maybe we don't want to mention them.

Cummings: I'd rather not mention them, because there are and still are some characters that I'd rather not mention it.

Dickerman: That's the love of Springfield. I notice on the top of your cabinet, you have some beautiful antique kerosene lamps that you said belong to your grandfather or great-grandfather, I'm not sure which.

Cummings: They were my great-grandparents'.

Dickerman: Great-grandparents. Now, since you go back so far in Springfield, was there any discussion of the 1908 race riot in your family that...

Cummings: Yes, there was. One of my dad's cousins used to tell us that people came out to my great, great grandparents that lived on Canedy during the race riot running, because they owned a lot of land there, and she was young, and she thought it was just a big party. She didn't know it was dangerous. And my great, great grandmother always cooked, and always prepared food for a lot of people, because that was just part of her. And my great-

grandfather could go in, his name was Nelson, was his last name, he could go in town because they accepted him, because he was a businessman, and he could get food and things and bring it out, and so she thought it was just one big party. She had no idea that people were getting killed and everything, because even though today, Canedy's not far from Spring and Cook, at that time it seemed like a long ways, because it was more – there weren't houses all over and things of that sort. There was a lot of prairie land.

Dickerman: So people sort of took refuge there at your grandparents' house, and your grandmother cooked for them – or great, great grandmother. Great-grandmother.

Cummings: My great, great grandmother. Yes, they took – they were out there, and because of my great-grandfather's standing in the community, nobody came to bother him.

Dickerman: That's very interesting. Well, let's go in – I know, because you're my friend, that you're on many boards, and have influence across the community. We might mention some of those boards. I'd like to hear them.

Cummings: One thing, I was on a lot of boards, but I did pick and choose. And a lot of people were not aware of that. Because I would ask them, did you want me on there for what I can contribute, or did you want me on there so you could count, me being black and a female? I said, because at that time, there were not that many professional black women here in Springfield. So I mean, you could be on every board in town if you wanted to. But I wasn't about to do that. But some of the groups that I'm still involved with are Business and Professional Women, the Federation, because I'm a past state president for that group, so I'm still involved with that. I'm a member of the American Association of University Women. I'm a member of the National Council of Negro Women, NAACP. I'm on the board appointed by the governor to the Illinois Surgical Treatment Center advisory board. I'm a member of the advisory council for the Illinois School for the Visually Impaired. Of course, my church. The Illinois Association of Affirmative Action Officers. And probably several others than I just take for granted.

Dickerman: Well, I knew that you were on a number of them, and that makes you influential in the community. Let's see, we'll stop...

(Pause in Recording)

Theresa Faith Cummings

Dickerman: Yes, let's go back to your childhood neighborhood, and talk about maybe the grocery stores that you patronized, and of course, you probably walked to school, in high school and grade school.

Cummings: The grocery stores in our area, and I don't remember the name, but there was one on the corner of Spring and Allen. There was one on Allen, where College ran into Allen. And then Ferguson's on Walnut and Allen. And so we had plenty of grocery stores. And I remember my parents going to – if we had to have any medicine or anything, to Watts Pharmacy, which I think was on South Grand and Pasfield. We did walk to and from school to Hay-Edwards, but Nelson and William Horsley were friends. And so Mr. Horsley picked us up at Williams and Pasfield every morning and took us to Springfield High School. So we didn't walk to Springfield High School.

Dickerman: I see. Well, that's a wonderful story. I knew it would be, Theresa.

(end of interview)