

Shirley Thomas

Interviewed by Johan Caminero & Jenny Nguyen

My name is Shirley L. Thomas. I was named by my father. Instead of Shirley they shortened it to Shirl, but I prefer to be called Shea. I was born on a Sunday, March 3, 1946. My aunt has the whole family tree in her Bible. It has the place and the time of the day all of us were born. I was born in Washington, DC, so I call myself a WashBostonian because I've been here since I was 6 months old.

I grew up in the South End of Boston. Our neighborhood was very diverse. We had Polish, Irish, Italian, and Greek people. You could go to the store and smell all of the different food. We were the minority because we were Black, but all the kids would play together. Most of the other people were Catholic, but my mother is Methodist. So we went to The Church of All Nations. It was non-denominational, which means anybody who wants to come is welcome.

Being in the South End at that time, we were all financially poor but we were rich in spirit. Everybody was on the same level. We were neighbors back then, not just people living in the same building. You helped each other out, and sometimes we fought or had disagreements, but we stuck together. One time my brother got in an incident with this Irish kid from South Boston. A group of kids thought they were going to beat up my brother for hanging out with this Irish kid, Jimmy McCormick. The whole neighborhood came out to make sure nobody was going to hurt him. The kids came from South Boston to the South End. They beat up his friend and thought they were going to beat up my brother. But then my mother came downstairs and she had this great big stick. All the people were like — *'get back.'* She took the stick and hit the ground, and said, *"you guys can fight him but*

nobody is going to jump on him". The kids tried to fight him, but my brother Tommy tore them a butt hole. Then once it happened, it was all over. If you got beat up, you didn't go tell anybody or go get a gun. Once it happened, you would just let it go.

When we were kids we had rules, and the elderly people in the neighborhood had as much control as our parents. So, if they saw you doing something, they could correct you on the spot! And if you sassed them they could correct you, **and then** they would tell your parents and you would get it from your parents. You couldn't say, "*Oh Miss So-and-So beat me, and so Mom you go over there and beat her.*" They would bring you right to the house, and back then your parents knew when you lied, so it was best to tell the truth. That's how it was because the older people ran the community.

At nighttime when the streetlights came on, we had to be at the door or up the stairs. If anybody had to come looking for you, you better forget it! My mother would look out that window and count five heads, "1, 2, 3, 4, 5," and if one was missing she would blame my oldest brother for whoever was missing and say, '*You better go get them.*'

When I was growing up I lived with my mother, my father, and four siblings. There's Harold (we call him Tommy), then there's Jacqueline, Franklin, Winston and me. Franklin died in 1978 when we had the Blizzard. He had walking pneumonia and nobody knew it. Then, Winston died in 1998. So I'm the youngest and my brother Tommy is the oldest — he was our role model. He had to get you and take you. My mother told him, '*Listen, you better not let anything happen to my babies.*' He learned how to cook, and he worked at the Parker House

downtown. Then went to New York to learn how to cook, so he's a chef like my father was.

I went to Boston Public Schools. First I went to the Abraham Lincoln School from about 6 to 9 years old. Then I moved from South End to Lower Roxbury and I went to the Dearborn Middle School. After that I went to the Timilty School in Eliot Square in Roxbury for junior high. I did have one teacher that I liked at the Timilty. His name was John D. O'Bryant. He was one the of few Black teachers I ever had, and he was a very encouraging Math teacher. If he saw that you wanted to strive for something, he would push you in that direction to go after what you wanted.

For high school I went to Brighton High, and that was my first time seeing a Hispanic girl. But I did not graduate high school, I left in 10th grade. Then later — in 1981 — I received my GED from the Boston Public Schools.

As the youngest in the family, I was never assigned any chores other than making my bed, so I didn't have too much to do. I would ask my mother if I could help with doing dishes but she just would just say 'no.' So I could do outside activities like play with my friends, or go to the community center. We didn't have any gangs. And we didn't have peer pressure back in the day, I was more afraid of my parents than any other kids. Her name was Octavia, Gladys Octavia, and people used to say '*Octavia is coming,*' and we'd say 'OH okay!' Let me tell you what she used to do to us in the snowstorm. I have a vague memory of this. My mother used to put us in galoshes and put socks on our hands with holes in them. Then my brother Tommy had to take us to school, but back then *it was like the winter of '78 all the time.* These little snowstorms we have today are nothing. We used to go to the second floor and jump off. We were crazy, but we didn't

have those video games. If there was a blizzard, my mom would attach us together, my brother Tommy first, then all of us in line, with me last. Back in the day, they didn't close down the schools like they do today.

When I was little I was sort of isolated. I was more of an introvert, but I had a good friend that I loved named Doris Porter. Her mother died and her father was remarried, so she had a stepmother and this lady treated her mean. When I would go by her house to ask her stepmother if she could come out to play, she would always say, '*no, because Doris has to do this or that.*' So I would only play with her when we went to camp. It was a at Goodwill summer camp for three months, and our cabin was called *Community*. So I got to play with her there. Sadly, later she died from ovarian cancer.

As children we would go to Morgie's, which was like a YMCA. We could play games. I liked the performing arts, so I would be in the plays. One time I played the part of Little Black Sambo, and in another play I was a bumblebee, which I really liked because I like dressing up, and getting outside of myself. We also took trips outside of Boston to places like Lucy Stone Park. We would go outside of the city because it was hot and there wasn't air conditioning.

We went to camp every summer from June to September. We'd all be in different cottages because my siblings and me were all different ages. At the end of camp, all the kids would get together and we would have a festival. It was a really fun camp for poor kids called Morgan Memorial Fresh Air Camps. All you had to bring was yourself, NO MONEY! It was nice because we got out of the hot tenement and would get to go swimming.

If I went to a dance I would have to be back at midnight. We girls would all go together and come home together. If we didn't separate from the group, we wouldn't run into trouble, until one day I stayed the night with my cousins. As soon as I came back in the house they were waiting for me. When I got home Frankie was instigating — you know how there is always one family instigator? So I'm rolling my eyes and twisting my neck because of Frankie, while my mom is saying, '*Didn't I tell you to come home?*' So I was trying to get right with my Mom, then all of the sudden I wake up from the floor. It was like BAM, and I was on the floor. Then I jumped up like I was going to do something, then I ran to hide under the kitchen table. She had a curtain rod, and she tore my fanny up.

My mother never abused me of course. It turned out that she had good reasons, and I never stayed out like that with my cousins anymore. I found out my uncle was a pervert. But I was too young for my mother to tell me. If she or my cousins had told me, there was no way I would have spent the night in that house. So now I know why she was worried.

As a teenager, I used to like to go to the movies, and we would roller skate. We had iron skates that had two clips that would lock on your shoe. And we skated on the concrete, so kids would get all sorts of broken elbows and knees. We also had box racecars. The kids in the neighborhood would make them, then clear the streets to race them. After all that, by the time we got home we were so tired we didn't have time to get into trouble, and we were too tired to get into fights. We had television, but did not have the kind of coverage like there is now. You would never hear of anything happening to kids, and when we did our ears were glued. We actually learned about most things through word of mouth.

When I was a child, I used to sing in church and that is how I found out that I had a pretty nice voice. My sister sang in the choir, so I decided I could do it too. The choir director said, you're going to be on the radio, but I didn't think too much about it. Then one day I went to church and they had the big microphone set up, and I asked what that was about and they told me I was going to be on the radio. So when church got out everybody was hanging around outside and told me they heard me on the radio. One lady wanted to give me voice lessons but my mother was like, *'you're not taking my child outta here. I don't know you well enough to take my child outta here.'* But, to make a long story short, I wanted to be a singer.

My hero was my Daddy — I was a Daddy's Girl. I look like his Momma and I look like him, so he was going to name me Malvina after her. But my Mom said no you're not naming my daughter that. So then he chose Shirley. My Dad worked really hard when he wasn't cooking. When he came up to Boston from Washington he wasn't allowed to work as a chef. There were unions that had the policy of *'no Blacks allowed,'* point blank. So he took up construction jobs and all of those hard kinds of jobs to feed his family. That's why my Dad is my hero. But it caught up with him in the end because he got asbestosis, which led to lung cancer. I used to wait for him every day when I was home. On payday, he would always give me a couple of dollars. Everybody else said *'Why didn't I get anything?'* and he would say, *'because Shirley is here for me everyday waiting while you guys are out there with your friends.'* I used to wait for him because I knew he worked so hard.

At one point, I had a babysitter named Ella. They had me call her Auntie Ella. She had some problems and she used to mistreat me. I would tell my Mother, but Ella was so convincing that my Mom didn't believe me. I used to have a habit of

clearing my throat when I was nervous, and Ella would, say '*stop, stop!*' Her sister Barbara told her I couldn't stop, but she beat me and put me in a cellar for a long time. There were rats in there, so I was really '*jammed up*' when I came out of that cellar. When I told my mother she didn't believe me. Tommy heard me tell my mother *everyday*, so he finally went over there and dealt with it. After that I didn't have to worry anymore.

The next scariest thing was that Ella and me had a love - hate relationship. I loved her, but hated the things she would do to me. Then one day I was coming home from a store that was right around the corner. I had to come down Washington St., and then Cobb St., then Mayo St. where I lived. As I was turning down the street, this car came up beside me, and a person was whispering at me to come over. I was always a friendly person, but when I went over to the car, there was a White man asking me if I wanted some candy. So I was like, '*candy?*' He was still driving and he cracked open the door moving the car a little. Ella was looking out the window and saw me, so she screamed at the top of her lungs, '*Shirley, RUN!*' So I ran as fast as I could. Then when I got in the house she beat me, and told my mother. Then my mother had a talk with me. One of the best things I was told by my mother was there are good people in every race, and just because somebody is Black doesn't mean they have my best interest at heart.

When I was 13 years old I had a disagreement with my sister because I wore a special sweater of hers to school without her permission. Then she came home with some of her friends before I had a chance to get it off. She was angry and told me to take it off and I said, '*no!*' So we went back and forth and ended up having a physical confrontation until someone told my Mother we were fighting. Then my Mom came in the room, picked up a broom, hit it on the floor, and said the next

person to throw a lick is going to get hit with this broom. So we stopped, sat it out for a couple days, then it was over. That's the only physical fight I remember having with my sister.

After high school I got a job at a chicken factory, then a shoe factory, and then a clothing factory until I was in my early twenties. Then I took a couple of courses at Newbury Junior College and I received my word processing certificate. Afterwards, I got a letter in the mail saying I had been on the Dean's List because I had all A's. Word Processing is basically an old term for computers, and it was important as a secretarial skill. So, I worked as a medical transcriber. I loved it! It was like being a detective. You had to pull words out of charts and off a Dictaphone. I worked for many years at the hospital that's now Tufts Medical Center.

Things I remember about the 1950's? Well, Dwight Eisenhower was president; there was a lot of segregation going on. Black and White kids couldn't go to the same dances, they had their dances and we had ours. My oldest brother Harold was in the army and he received honorable discharge. Also, we had this hurricane in 1956 and my mother and me were not aware of it. So we were walking to the store and this big wind gust came and blew her off her feet and almost off of the bridge, and I was holding her down to keep her from falling off the bridge!

I remember *I Love Lucy* and *Amos n' Andy* which was the first Black sitcom. And I remember some cartoons like *Tom & Jerry* — they were violent and they fought a lot. I also remember *Yosemite Sam* and *Sylvester*.

From the 1960s I remember the Freedom Riders and the bus boycotts. I was only 18 when that happened, and I remember telling my mother I was going to go down

there. She said, *'Oh yeah, I don't think so.'* Of course I was happy with the changes that the Civil Rights Movement brought, but we had to wait until Lyndon B. Johnson actually brought the laws into action. And the Women's Movement was exciting because we had birth control pills and were burning bras! Sex became more above the table, women had more sexual freedom, and less fear of becoming pregnant. But, there were still a lot of STDs out there. so I did not join in.

I remember all of the assassinations were so sad. When I heard that JFK got shot, I was in Woolworth's on Washington Street at Dudley Station. I knew something had happened because everybody got really quiet and they were looking at the TV. It was as if time had stopped. Then I saw people were crying, so I asked what happened and people told me they had killed him in Dallas. I also remember when they killed Martin Luther King on April 4th. I was visiting my cousin in South Boston. She lived in a prejudiced area with a lot of Irish people. I went on the bus to visit her, and then suddenly when getting off the bus, I felt a brick fly by my head and someone shouted the "N" word out the window of a car. So, I got inside the house and asked my cousin what was going on. She told me that Martin Luther King just got shot.

I was a '60s girl,' that was when Motown came out. When we could get out without our parents that was the biggest adventure. We had most of our dances in the basements of churches. All of the girls would leave together and come back together. Then before the dance was over we would have dance offs. Everybody would get in a circle and see who was the best. Also we would have our hair pressed, and clothes and shoes too, but when we came out of the dance hall our hair was everywhere. Our clothes were all messed up and were all sweaty. But, there was no violence.

When we started hearing about people bringing guns we were like, 'what?' You might as well have said they had a bazooka! We had gangs but it was more about who were the good-looking guys or the geeky guys? There was even — who could kick whose butt — but it was not about killings at all!

Yes, I remember the Viet Nam War and that the poor kids were on the line while the rich kids went to college. People said that it was more of a conflict rather than a war. And it just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger until Lyndon B. Johnson stopped it.

The 1970's were a fun. Donna Summer was a disco queen who came from Roxbury and went to the Jeremiah Burke. I remember Disco. There were platform shoes, maxi clothes, long skirts and coats. There were bellbottom pants and men came out of dark suits and started wearing neon suits, pants and shoes. And those platform shoes, men's shoes were higher than ours. Fashion was wild, and so was the music! There wasn't too much turmoil because everybody was like— the 60s are over.

Jimmy Carter was president, and it was scary time because Americans my age were not focused too much on what was going on outside of America. We had been taught geography but we were not aware. We were worried about America and what we had to do here, but when the hostage crisis happened we were like, '*Damn those people hate us!*'

I had an attempted rape when I was in my thirties. My boyfriend and I were going out, but he bought over a couple of friends when he came to my place. I had been

washing some intimate laundry in the sink before they came; so one guy kept looking at that when we were all in the kitchen. Then my boyfriend said he had to go pick up another person at the airport. So, everybody went out the door and I decided to take a shower to get ready for the evening. I thought all three of them had gone out the door, but when I finished my shower and came out of the bathroom, there was this guy standing in my bedroom. And he was looking at me, and I looked at him.

Sometimes you have to think on your feet. I'm laughing now, but it wasn't funny. So I grabbed the phone and went back into the bathroom and locked the door. So I'm talking on the phone to the police, '*blah, blah, blah.*' But, the funny thing is that the phone wasn't on. I was just pretending I was talking to somebody. And, when I came out of the bathroom, he was gone. So it scared him and he left. The phone didn't work, but I had to figure out something. When my boyfriend came back I told him about it. I didn't call the police or anything; I was probably in shock because I got away. At least I thought that was his intention. I never got over that. I've had several other instances of things happening like that, so you have to pay attention and be street smart, you really do. You need to pay attention because when you least expect it, something can happen and you have to know how to think on your feet and get yourself out of there. If it ever does happen to you, never let them take you to a second place, because you ain't leaving there.

When I get up in the morning, I look forward to seeing my cats. They're my babies. And, I have family. We just had a real nice Easter dinner. I have two surviving siblings, my brother Tommy and my sister Jackie. Jackie was the one that never knew anything! She knew but she would never tell on us.

Jackie has a beautiful daughter Lenora, who I named. But when she was a little girl, she looked like Jiminy Cricket because she was long and skinny, so my brother Frankie nicknamed her Lolo. Now she has a husband and three children. Her husband is David E. Brown aka '*Big David.*' Their oldest daughter is Latarsha. I had the privilege of being present when she was born. She graduated from Clarke University in GA. Next is David E. Brown Jr. I was also there when he was born, but I was outside the birthing room because I had to babysit Latarsha. He was sickly when he was born so he was in an incubator for a while. My special name for him is '*Budawuda.*' He's a performing artist and went to the Boston Arts Academy. And, last but not least is Imari O. Brown. Her father was present at her birth. My special name for her is '*Winter Baby*' because we were both born in the winter. She just graduated from English High School. They've always been loving and very supportive of me. And my brother Tommy also has a fourteen year old daughter we call '*Little Jackie.*'

I also have a group of friends that I meet and we go walking together, things like that. I'm going to be joining an exercise class, and I also like to draw with colored pencils, and sing and dance. Those things make me happy!

I think my greatest accomplishment in life has been my interaction with people from all cultures. You get to learn so many things. You find out that what you think is so different, really isn't. People are people, basically, and everybody wants the same things for their kids.

What I learned from my family was that if I wanted to do something, don't let anyone stop me. I could do anything I set my mind to, and that I wasn't any better than anyone else, and *nobody* was any better than me either.

My words of wisdom would be to love yourself and try to help others when you can. And be careful about following your peers. Follow your own path and hold onto your own hopes, dreams, and your morals. Don't follow the crowd, be a leader not a follower. I learned this from my Mother.