

15 MINUTES

Curious about being black

BY ROGER WILLIAMS
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Vivian T. Hill, 77, has always been curious about what it means to be a black woman. She keeps trying to figure out how experiences in her life, like puzzle pieces, might match up with history. She thinks about her grandmother, for instance, who had 10 children and accepted the world for what it was.

"She was one of those what I call 'conventional grandmothers,'" Ms. Hill said. "Having to bake things in the fireplace, having to quilt things together to keep her children warm, growing collared greens, raising chickens. We never went to the store.

"I always wondered why we couldn't go to the store and buy things like we saw people across the railroad tracks do, and she said 'that's just the way it is.'" That was in Alabama.

When Ms. Hill was 5, her family moved to Binghamton, N.Y., and their privileges changed.

"We could go to school," she said. "We could go downtown; we could buy dresses instead of sewing them."

It was different from the South. Part of it had to do with the fact that her parents found better jobs in Binghamton. But it also had a lot to do with different attitudes about what it meant to be black in the North.

Ms. Hill wanted to know "why people of a certain class were treated one way, and why people of a certain class were

treated another way, and why there was a regional difference."

"So," she explained, "I started reading books. I constantly was researching as to why things were as they were."

She looked at her grade-school teachers, some of whom were black, and decided she wanted to be like them. After high school, she worked at a hardware store for two years, long enough to pay tuition at Ohio State University along with her scholarship. When she graduated in 1954, there were jobs for white, but not black, teachers in Columbus, Ohio.

"They questioned our intelligence," Ms. Hill said.

But as her grandmother would say, "That's just the way it is," and anyway, she was falling in love with "a military man."

"I thought he was the most handsome being I had seen at the time," she said.

After he was discharged from the Army, the couple spent all their money on a trip to Canada. Ms. Hill thought about it and she laughed. "We went to Niagara Falls," she said. "Don't you know that's where you go when you're totally in love?"

She added, "We did foolish things in those days."

They moved to Fort Myers, where Ms. Hill's father-in-law was a pastor. She found a welcoming community in Dunbar and a warm climate she loved, along with the insistent racism she, like her grandmother, took for what it was: on some level, it had nothing to do with her.

"I had to go in the back door and to special churches and so forth," she said. "But



EVAN WILLIAMS/FLORIDA WEEKLY

Vivian T. Hill

I spent all my passions on education."

Ms. Hill was a kindergarten teacher for 31 years in Lee County and was honored as the teacher of the year in Florida in the 1970s. She is still inspired by black historical figures from Fort Myers like Dr. Ella Piper, a beautician, foot doctor and well-known philanthropist who died in 1954. She emulates Dr. Piper's activism, as well as style points.

"When I looked at her and her hats — see, I wear a hat like her — I thought she was what all communities needed. You don't have to sit back and let the world go by. I'm tired of hearing people grumble and mumble about this or that. Take it from where it is and move on."

Ms. Hill has done exactly that. Although her husband died decades ago, she speaks with her son, a speech therapist in Tampa, every day. She is the church news edi-

tor for The Community Voice, a weekly newspaper published in Dunbar, and a member of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church.

She also sits on the board of the Black History Museum in Fort Myers. The museum is struggling financially, so one of the things she thinks about now is how to keep it open.

She still thinks about how to reconcile the struggles of the black community past with the black community present.

Ms. Hill only thinks about being black some of the time. Sometimes — like when she's in her rocking chair or "gossiping" on her cell phone — she thinks about nothing in particular.

Most of all, Ms. Hill thinks about living.

"When I get out of bed, I'm so glad to be living another day," she said. "I don't worry about food or nothing." ■

Related event

>>What: Curtis Lundy "All Star" Jam Session with cocktails and hors' d'oeuvres, to benefit the Lee County Black History Museum

>>When: Feb. 27, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

>>Where: The Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center

>>Why: The concert is the closing reception of "Jazz in Fort Myers: A Salute to McCollum Hall," a pictorial exhibit of all the great jazz legends at the Davis Art Center.

>>Cost: \$35 donation.

>>Info: Call 210-7992 or visit www.lee-county-blackhistory.com

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