



10:1 Claudia Thomas

Claudia Thomas is the first black female orthopaedic surgeon in the United States. She was recently presented with the 2008 Diversity Award from the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons in recognition of her single-handed efforts in increasing the numbers of black and women residents at Johns Hopkins Medical Center. Where were you born?
Brooklyn Hospital in New York City, New York.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I didn't have any idea. I guess the thing that's been most consistent in my life has been art. I have some early drawings—they look like cave dweller drawings—in the garage in the house I grew up in. So I started sketching and drawing at an early age and I imagine that if I had thought of being anything it was to be an artist.

So how did you end up being an orthopedic surgeon?

By the grace of God. What happened was the process of elimination. I developed a talent for mathematics in elementary school and this continued through high school to the point that I got hundreds on my math tests... So when I went to college I was a math major...After about 3 years of this, I decided enough was enough. It wasn't what I thought it was going to be. Then I actually sat down and thought about what I'd do there as a career, none of the possibilities were appealing to me. So I switched to pre-med at the end of my junior year of college...When I got into Johns Hopkins I decided I would pursue a path in surgery because of the art, the manual dexterity, sculpting, sewing...and the use of the hands...Then I had to choose what type of surgery. I was exposed to orthopedic surgery...when that happened, I just loved it because it combined art, it combined solid geometry or geometry in three dimensions, and carpentry which my father had skilled me in. So all of these things put together were my passions. And it was just fun to be able to reshape the human body and repair the human body when it had worn itself out.

Who was inspirational in your life?

My mother, I'm sure, was the greatest inspiration. She was a tremendous motivator. She motivated by fear. If you didn't do your best, you would feel the strap on your rear end. So she expected a certain standard and we tried to live up to that, my sister and I. She was dyslexic and was limited in her education because of that. Though she did return to school and get her BA at the age of 55. When we were coming up as children, our job was school and we were expected to do well and no Bs or Cs were allowed...She used the talents that God gave her to focus on her children and we were the main focus of her life. And in that way she was my inspiration.

What challenges have you met along the way?

The first challenge that I became aware of and I was made aware of by my parents was the fact that we were, at that time, Negro—or now we would say 'African American'—was that things were different for us and opportunities were not as plentiful and if we wanted to achieve we would have to work harder than other people but things were not going to be easy. And so my biggest challenge was the challenge of being under-represented wherever I went. The first conscious manifestation of this occurred in college when in 1969 a handful of African American students at Vassar College realized that the college was not addressing our needs....and after making several appeals to the College to make some changes and being ignored, we ended up occupying the administration building for 4 days and getting all our demands after that occupation.

Is this what spurred you to increase those numbers at Johns Hopkins?

Well, I guess it was the same spirit a few years later. But as I went on in life I always encountered people who felt I didn't belong wherever I was. In fact, a faculty member at Hopkins had the nerve to approach me and say, "I remember you when you applied to medical school, I voted against you." How can you say that to someone's face? I looked at him like he was crazy. Except by this time I was actually on faculty. But this is the white man's privilege to say something like that to you and you're supposed to just take it. And this is an example of those who felt I didn't belong. And then when I choose surgery as a specialty and, oh my god, orthopedic surgery, this was a male-dominated field. When I decided to do orthopedics there were about 25 women in the country doing orthopedic surgery.

Do you think that's what really drove you? To prove something?

No, not at all. I enjoyed it. I noticed there were no women. There weren't many women in surgery period. But it was what appealed to me. It was what fit. I spoke to the chief resident and said, "I like this stuff but I don't see any women doing it." And he responded by telling me there's no reason why you can't do this. This was my motivation.

What have you had to do to increase those numbers of black and female residents at Johns Hopkins?

I had to be involved. I couldn't sit on the sidelines. With every step I took from medical school on up I could feel the doors closing behind me, I could hear the rush of the wind. When I took the job at Johns Hopkins Medical School, the first African American to be admitted to that medical school was a senior. We're talking about 1971. They had graduated people of color who



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were African or West Indian, not American citizens. But Hopkins had a small number of African American students and he was the only one in his class. My class had 10 African American students, so I was riding the crest of the wave. The class before me had 8, the class before that might have had 4. And then after my class I could see the numbers going back down. So I knew that I was in a temporary situation, if you will. With this in mind, I decided I couldn't be the last, you know. I wanted to keep the doors open. The way I did this is that I volunteered. I volunteered my input under the admissions committee for the medical school, for the president's selection process for the orthopedic surgery. That's how you are influential. I've shared my views with the other people who are on these committees about how about having some degree of social consciousness, making a difference, taking the best and the brightest, and diversifying at the same time. And the face of the medical school at Johns Hopkins and the face of orthopedic surgery started to change. In a field that had women and African Americans represented in low single digits, they have 32% African Americans in the program and 20% females in the program is extraordinary. This doesn't happen by itself....it takes some work.

How do you feel about making a difference in the lives of others?

I feel it's my responsibility. To make milestones you have to make sure that you are leading other people to come behind you, leaving those footprints. You have to keep that door open and actively reach out to people through mentoring and through being visible. It's not enough to be the first to do something, you have to be the best and you have to do it well. When I found out I was the first woman, I said, well I sure won't be the last. As the first woman, if I had done a lousy job, it would have been a while before they took another woman. I have to be powerful, I have to be strong, and in a field that is very physical—and for that reason it's primarily male—I had to be extraordinary.

You've recently learned French. What other dreams would you like to fulfill?

I would love to travel the world. I've been to different places that most people have not been to but I would love to take a world cruise, if time allowed and help allowed, while being blessed with good health, I would like to do that. **DI**

