

Name of Interviewee: Elaine Douglas
Recording Identification: Rec003_0026
Google Drive Folder: Oral Histories / Montclair150 / montclair150-01-douglas
Additional Materials: TV34 interview
Interviewer: Donald DeLeon (Montclair State Student) and Montclair State Student
Date: 04/21/2018
Location: Montclair Fire Department on 1 Pine St, Montclair, NJ.

Introduction:

Dr. Elaine Douglas shares the legacy of her paternal family's long-time presence in Montclair, the racial prejudice her family overcame, and the many "firsts" they achieved academically and professionally.

Her father, Frederick Douglas, was raised in Montclair, and graduated from Montclair High School. Overcoming racial hurdles and with much persistence, he became the first Black physician to become a full "attending" at Montclair's three hospitals: Mountainside, St. Vincent's, and Montclair Community. Her mother, Daisy Douglas (who was raised in Washington, D.C.), was one of the first Black teachers in Montclair and would become the head of the Home Economics Department at Montclair High School. Dr. Douglas recalls her parents fondly, as "pretty remarkable people." She notes that she, along with along with classmate Sharron Miller [Sharron Miller Dance/Academy for the Arts in Montclair] who was one year ahead of her in school, were the first Blacks to be inducted into the National Honor Society of Montclair High School – a milestone likely made possible by advocacy of her active parents and other active Black parents who explored the racial inequity that had existed within the program.

She lived in Montclair from the age of six weeks until she graduated from high school in 1964, and then returned to reside here full time in 1986, joining her father's medical practice. She offers recollections of growing up in the South End, neighborhood schools, racial awareness of what was "off limits" to her as a young Black person in town. She speaks several times about an organization called "Jack and Jill," a family-oriented social/activity group formed by Black women and their families, in which her family was very active, and which had a very positive influence on her growing years.

Dr. Douglas describes her own career path from teacher to physician, inspired greatly by her father's love of the profession. She would become the first Black female attending physician affiliated with Mountainside Hospital and ultimately join him in the family practice when she returned to Montclair. She relishes the time when four generations of her family lived together in the home in which she grew up, and that her daughter and her family still reside in the family home with her – including her grandson who may become the fourth generation Montclair High School graduate!

Dr. Douglas comments very positively on several significant changes that she realized had occurred in Montclair by the time she'd returned in 1986: the magnet school system, a more Democratic-leaning political scene, and acceptance of inter-racial couples.

Timestamps:

[0:00:19 - 0:01:08] Dr. Douglas's [paternal] great grandparents had moved to Montclair in the 1890s. She arrived in Montclair as a six-week-old baby. Her father's line is the connection to Montclair. Her father was born in Pittsburgh and was raised in Montclair, graduating from Montclair High School. Dr. Elaine

Douglas was raised in Montclair, left in 1964 after high school, and returned in 1986.

[0:01:09 - 0:01:57] “My mother's side of the family is from... Washington D.C. She married my father in 1942 right before the war [World War II]. While he was overseas, she was in D.C., North Carolina. I am a baby boomer...the first of the Baby Boomers: when my father got home, I probably came about nine or ten months later! He came back to Montclair after the service. He had grown up in Montclair. Montclair was a very different town than what it is now.”

[0:01:58 - 0:02:53] “My father [Frederick Douglas – no relation to social reformer Frederick Douglass] wanted to become a physician, and when he left Montclair after high school, he came back with the idea that he wanted:

Number 1) He wanted his children to go to Nishuane School because they were two schools that Black kids could go to-- Nishuane and Glenfield. They were neighborhood schools back then. We lived on Lincoln Street. One side of Lincoln Street went to Glenfield and the other side of Lincoln Street went to Nishuane, so we were on this side of the street that went to Nishuane.

My father did become a physician and his other goal was to be eligible to admit patients as a physician... as a black physician... to the hospitals here in Montclair, which he could not do initially. So that that was another part of my history.”

[0:02:54 - 0:03:33] When asked how he fought that, Dr. Douglas replied that although she was very much still a child then, but she shared: “He worked with the local NAACP and ... another group. There was another physician, Frank Thompson, Sr., who was he was admitted to Mountainside [Hospital's] admitting staff at the same time, but Dr. Thompson was a much older man than my father. Actually. Dr. Thompson's son, [also Frank Thompson], was my father's contemporary.”

[0:03:33 - 0:04:14] Her father was the first Black physician to become a full “attending” at Montclair's three hospitals: Mountainside, St. Vincent's, and Montclair Community. Her mother, Daisy Douglas, was one of the first Black teachers in Montclair. Because of these “firsts,” Dr. Douglas notes, “I have an impressive lineage,” and she adds with a self-deprecating laugh, “...can't live up to it.”

[0:04:16 - 0:05:04] Her mother initially talked to Glenfield [School], and then she moved out to George Inness [School], during which time George Inness became part of Montclair High School. During that time her mother, Daisy Douglas, was head of the Home Economics Department. Dr. Douglas recalls her parents fondly with the interviewer, as both “pretty remarkable people.”

[0:05:15 - 0:06:15] When asked if her father's career influenced her to become a physician: “No, medicine is not my first career. My first career was a teacher! When I was going to Montclair High School, I was a good student, good in math good in science.” Though her father encouraged her to consider medicine, she was reluctant to commit to the number of years of schooling. Instead, she received a degree in music education, got married, and had a daughter. She really enjoyed teaching music.

[0:06:15 - 0:07:07] In 1973-75, she was pursuing a Master's degree and her husband was getting a Doctorate at Rutgers in New Brunswick. She found the school's Library of Science and Medicine to be a

good study setting, but also discovered a growing interest in the medical journals there. While she considered getting into medicine then, at age 24-25, she ultimately decided to continue with her Masters in Social Studies Education as planned.

[0:07:08 - 0:08:00] After receiving her degree, she and her family lived in Denver, Colorado where she taught in a predominantly white district. She had a falling out with the principal and didn't get tenure. Now age 33, she recognized that her interest in medicine had grown and believed that her teaching position in Colorado would not be renewed, although she was confident she could get another position.

[0:08:06 - 0:09:06] She returned to Montclair to help care for her father after his heart bypass surgery. Coincidentally, she met with Dr. Frank Thompson, III, her friend and contemporary who was a psychiatrist, who accompanied her to visit her father one day in the hospital. When Dr. Thompson, III asked Dr. Frederick Douglas, then in his late 60s and recovering from his very recent surgery if he would return to work, Dr. Elaine Douglas was moved and inspired by her father's conviction and passion to return to medicine. She said, "His eyes just lit up when he talked about medicine."

[0:09:11 - 0:09:55] This experience was the catalyst that made her decide to begin two years of classes before gaining acceptance into the University of Colorado Medical School in Denver.

[0:11:01 - 0:12:44] When asked about her experience as a Black mom in medical school, Dr. Douglas replied: "Yes, I was the only Black in my class. I was not the only mother in my class, and I was the oldest. [at almost 34 years old]. But she noted that while the average age of the incoming medical school freshman at Howard, where both of her parents had attended and where she had considered medical school, was 22 or 23, the University of Colorado skewed older, and she felt it was a more comfortable fit. She alludes to no difficulty as a woman, as 30% of her classmates were women, but that she faced difficulties with the administration because of her race.

[0:12:45 - 0:14:53] "I took over my dad's practice in the house that I grew up in, noting that she'd just given up the practice four months prior to this oral history interview. She and her father practiced Family Medicine together in the practice before he retired at the age of 78. She noted one patient who had been with the family's practice for more than 60 years!

[0:14:56 - 0:15:56] When asked what it was like to step into her father's footsteps, Dr. Douglas replies emphatically, "They were very, very big shoes to fill. I'm biased, but my father was a phenomenal physician, his patients adored him. I don't even try to fill them... I stood on his shoulders."

"I mentioned that he became the first Black physician at Mountainside [Hospital] to become a full attending, and he literally paved the way for me. I am virtually a hundred percent certain that he was the first Black physician. I'm almost certain that I'm the first Black female because when I became a full attending I asked to see if there had been any other black female physicians, and no one could come up with anyone."

[0:16:08] She describes how different the experience and process of becoming a full attending was for her father, who had to fight to get on staff, and for herself, who received the privilege as a due course of the

number of her admissions.

[0:18:06 - 0:18:39] She describes her reaction to receiving notification in the mail that she'd been granted full attending privileges, shortly after her father had passed away. "My father had fought ...tooth and nail...to get what was just handed to me. The irony of it was just overwhelming...it's sort of like going full circle."

[0:18:40 - 0:20:39] Dr. Douglas discusses her return to Montclair to finish her residency at Mountainside Hospital and join her father's practice. While she first lived in a home around the corner from her parents' home, she moved back into the family home after her father's death to be with her mother. Dr. Douglas's daughter attended Montclair High School – third generation Montclair High School graduate – and with her daughter's family in the home, there were four generations under one roof. Since her mother's death, there are three generations, and the expectation is that her daughter's son will be the fourth generation to graduate from Montclair High School!

[0:21:02 - 0:23:20] When asked about places where Dr. Douglas liked to hang out when she was growing up: "There weren't too many social places that I can think. Montclair has changed a lot since I left, since I was in school. It was not the diverse town that it is now. It was quite segregated, quite conservative. quite Republican, and there were places that blacks were not supposed to go when I was growing up. Upper Montclair in general was sort of off limits and we used to hang out on the South End of town at Rudd's Dairyland. It was the ice cream place. We used to hang out there."

She also recalled that, her mother belonged to Jack and Jill, an organization of Black women and their kids, so she and her brother and mom did activities with that group. There were not that many "Jack and Jill-ers" in Montclair and not all the activities took place in Montclair. She also recalls house parties when she was in junior high school and high school, and things like that as recreational, social activities.

She talks about spending time, especially in the summer, with her first cousins who lived in Montclair.

[0:23:20-[0:25:02] When asked how she knew where she could go and where she couldn't go along Bloomfield Avenue: Dr. Douglas doesn't recall doing a lot of things along Bloomfield Avenue. She explains that, since her mother was a teacher and home in the summer, her house was a meeting place for cousins to gather and hang out.

She recalls a soda fountain shop on Bloomfield Avenue and S. Fullerton/Church St. [Note: Hinck Building - Grunnings?] that they frequented in high school; she did NOT go to Bond's in Upper Montclair although some of her Black contemporaries did; she didn't go to Tierney's, but since she didn't drink that didn't "faze her" much. She added, "It was just sort of understood that you didn't go to those places. You knew where you were not welcomed, and you just didn't try to buck the system. We just didn't."

[0:25:55 - 0:28:01] When asked about the church her family attended: While her family was among the founding parishioners of St. Mark's, she herself never went there. Her mother was the daughter of a Baptist minister; and her father, while "an ethical and moral man, was not religious." Her mother

attended Union Baptist Church on Midland Avenue, but when Dr. Douglas was age 10/5th grade and her brother was in first grade, their mom switched to First Congregational Church, where she remained a parishioner for over 50 years. While the children were given the option to remain at the Sunday School at the Union Baptist Church, Dr. Douglas, cognizant of her own growing religious curiosity/skepticism, was also ready to attend elsewhere. She attended Sunday School at the Unitarian Church on Church Street and remained at that parish through high school.

[0:28:14 - 0:30:04] When asked about groups she was involved with as a youth: Dr. Douglas reiterates her family's active involvement with the Jack and Jill group. She was also involved in music, primarily through school: singing, orchestra at Montclair High School. She took accordion lessons beginning in elementary school. She joked, "When I decided to get serious about music, I said I can't really do that with the accordion!" She added that she took up the flute in Junior High School, which is kind of late compared to other music students who begin taking instrumental music in fourth grade, but by the time she was a senior she was playing first chair. She modestly adds, "Not necessarily that I was the best player, because I wasn't, but I really did work hard."

[0:30:07 - 0:32:51] She notes that she, along with along with classmate Sharron Miller [Sharron Miller Dance/Academy for the Arts in Montclair] who was one year ahead of her in school, were the first Blacks to be inducted into the National Honor Society of Montclair High School. Dr. Douglas recognizes the role actively involved parents such as hers and her mother's knowledge of the school system, as a teacher in the district, contributed to that milestone. Her parents and some others were aware that there were no Black students in the National Honor Society, found it "unusual" and began to explore the reasons. She found out that students could be anonymously "blackballed" by teachers, preventing them from being inducted, and was determined to right that. Dr. Douglas understands that another student, Marilyn Tyndall (sp?), who was three or four years older than she, had received the top honor from Montclair High School but wasn't in the National Honor Society because she had been anonymously blackballed by a teacher.

Returning to social involvement, Dr. Douglas mentions that she was a twirler and was therefore connected also with the marching band, but returns to her discussion about the role the Jack and Jill social group played in her life as being a greater social influence. She is still in contact with friends (including sons of physicians that had gone to school with her father: Frank Thompson, III and John Bunky Pinderhughes) she made through that organization.

[0:32:52 - 0:35:21] She mentions an article written by Montclair Township Historian and Montclair History Center Trustee Mike Farrelly from February 2015 in the Montclair Times about Black families in Montclair identifying several Black families in Montclair who had been here for generations--who had come up here after the Civil War as part of the Great Migration to the north, including Dr. Douglas's family.

[can we link to that article?]

The article includes information about the family name, Dickens and that her grandmother's name was Ari, great grandmother's name was possibly Elizabeth, but she doesn't recall her great grandfather's name, although it was included in the article. She commented, "I knew that my *grandparents* had been in

Montclair, but I didn't know that my *great*-grandparents had come to Montclair.” Dr. Douglas is not aware of the state or county in the south from which her great grandparents moved. She added, “I am from Montclair and finding out that my great-grandparents are too is heartwarming.” She’s proud of that long family presence and legacy in town.

[0:35:52 - 0:36:27] She talks about being away from Montclair from 1964 (after high school graduation) and moving back to Montclair in 1986. Although she visited her parents throughout those years, she was not closely in tune with changes happening in town, and she felt very positive about the changes when she returned here to reside.

[0:36:28 - 0:37:59] She talks about de facto segregation in neighborhood schools when she was growing up. “You went to the school that was closest to where you lived and because the housing was segregated ... [the schools were segregated]. If you were a black person you lived on the South End of town. And if you're an Italian person you lived on the South End of town, but on the other side of the South End of the town so that the blacks were here and the whites were here and they didn't start to meet until junior high school when more neighborhoods would feed into [a larger junior high school] and of course, it was just one high school [for the entire town]. And even though the high school was integrated, ... they had tracking ..so the upper tracks were predominantly white and the lower tracks were predominantly black.”

While she was away, and while her mother was still a teacher in the district, the school system had gone from being neighborhood schools to magnet schools. And there was bussing for integration as opposed to bussing for segregation. Dr. Douglas noted that when she was growing up, “the schools were not segregated by law. They were just segregated because they were neighborhood schools. It wasn't by law. It was de facto.”

[0:38:00 - 0:38:58] In addition to the new magnet school system being introduced while Dr. Douglas lived elsewhere, another positive change she noted upon her return in 1986 was the increased diversity and the political leanings of many residents. She said, “There were always black folks and white folks and whatnot. But there wasn't a lot of mingling of the races when I was growing up. There was some, obviously, but it's not like it is now. The other thing that struck me when I came back was the difference in the political scene. “

[0:38:59 - 0:39:57] She talks about being a Democrat at the age of 14 when she declared, “JFK was my guy!” and going to the Democratic headquarters on Bloomfield Avenue next to the Clairidge Theater where she volunteered for the presidential campaign. She realized that being “a Democrat in Montclair was very, very rare. Well, I mean it was very difficult.” Therefore, the strong Democratic party presence she observed when she returned in 1986 was that much more heartening to her.

[0:40:03 - 0:40:42] She talks about the acceptance of interracial couples today. “When I was in high school I was dating a white guy. I wasn't even in high school. I was in eighth grade and you know, we were just eighth graders -- not even anything. And his father was so upset that he moved his family.” She reiterates how pleased she is that that reaction has changed and that interracial couples are readily accepted in Montclair.

[0:42:12 - 0:43:28] “I’m really happy that my daughter and her family decided to move in because one of the things that’s happened to Montclair is that it’s become a ‘magnet’ place and folks like myself are priced out of the town. There’s no way I could have afforded to stay in the house...especially without the [medical] office. The idea that I can know that my grandson might be the fourth generation Montclair High graduate? I think it’s pretty neat, and we’re hoping for that.”

[0:43:33 - 0:44:32] As she concludes she expresses appreciation that the Montclair History Center is recording these oral histories. “There’s a lot to tell about Montclair,” and she’s glad it’s being documented before it’s forgotten.