

# Our Expanded World: Cleottice Greer Walton and Mathew Greer, Texas

Story Narrative:

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** My name is Cleottice Greer-Walton.

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** Matthew Greer, Junior.

**Speaker 3:** All right. And where did you grow up?

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** I grew up here in Mineola, Texas.

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** Yeah, we both did.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** As he said, we lived in the country about six miles from here in the section houses. And we didn't have a car for a long time. And my parents, my dad was a hands-on dad where he'd spend a lot of time with us. And I remember in the evenings there was this store, it was called Gillum's Grocery. It was on Highway 80, and we would always walk there and get sodas or whatever. And then we would walk home and sometimes...

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** Go on little picnics.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** Go on little picnics. And there was a road that went there. Across the road, there was a lot of sand and he used to always go over there with us and we would play in the sand a lot. And then, as I said, we didn't have a car. And sometimes on the weekends we would walk from our house out to Highway 80 and we would just sit there...

**Mathew Greer, Jr.:** Counting cars.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** And count cars. My mother and my dad, and I don't think our younger brother was born yet, but the three kids, and it was just simple.

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** Oh yeah. And for me it was the train. That's before we moved onto Landers Street. We lived out in the country away, and in the railroad housing, in the section houses, what the railroad had. You don't remember that, do you?

**Speaker 3:** No, sir.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.:** Okay. So the railroad workers lived in these section houses, they called them. And the train ran right by the house. It's like as far from here as the street. And that was one of my first memories, was hearing that train. And it wasn't the trains they have now. It was old locomotives, old steam choo-choos.

Yeah. It was noisy and smokey and smelly. But that was one of my earliest memories. In the railroad housing all of the families, our dads worked together and all the kids played together, ate together, slept together, whenever. Well, as we got older, then we had to realize that we had to part ways in a sense, because when you're four or five years old and then you get a little bit older, and then this white kid that you're playing with all day, he catches a different bus to school than you do. Or you come into town and he can go into the front door of the cafe and you have to go around to the back door. But otherwise, when you are at home or when you are out hunting and swimming and having a good time, you're just kids. But then when you come into town, something different. You can't go there and you can't go there. So Daddy always made sure that we felt that we should feel that we were as good as anybody else, even though we weren't always treated that way.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** Well, I remember the Select Theater, and we'd always done this documentary where we had to go upstairs to the movies and there wasn't a bathroom. I can remember that. Everywhere.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.:** Yeah.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** That was the one thing I could remember.

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** Yeah, that's the thing.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** And of course I remember when, I guess we were still here when they built the library.

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** This one?

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** Yeah. Or were we gone?

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** I don't know.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** But we didn't really have access to the library. We didn't. And if they had eating places here, you always had to go in the back door. And this was one thing, I still remember the train station. I remember the old train station because we used to ride the train a lot. My dad worked for the railroad and we had passes and we used to ride the train a lot. And when they built the new train station, the one that was there before they remodeled it this time, was really nice. But it had white and colored waiting rooms, and we had to go in the side that said colored. And then when, I guess it was federal law or something, and they had to take that white and colored down, they had to take those signs down and you could use either side.

**Mathew Greer, Jr. :** Of course, because it was familiar, they kept using the white side and the colored side. And one Sunday we went to the movies and my girlfriends and I were coming from the movies, and we decided we were going to go on the white side. And we went in and we went in the bathroom. And I'll never forget this, there was no different.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.** : It was the same.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** It was the same. It was the same. Everything in there was the same. And I couldn't understand why couldn't we go here, but it was the same.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.** : And when I went to California, I worked at the post office for a couple years, but in the meantime I was doing things in the theater on the side. And after a couple of years that started building up, so I decided to leave the post office, and I started learning theater; working backstage, doing apprenticeships, learning lights and sound. And I decided to go to school. And I went to school for a couple of years and studied theater. And after that, man, that's all I did. You'd find me all in one week, I might stage manage one play, build the sets for another show, play in a band for something else, and then be on stage for something else. So I was just consumed with theater because I found something that I really did love and I was good at. And I felt at home doing it, so I could forget about all this other crap.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** [inaudible 00:08:22] just called me.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.):** Yeah? She had five kids.

So, I talked to my dad on the phone during the Christmas holidays and I was just getting back into California from New York, had been out there for a few months. And so I talked to him during the holidays and he said, he was telling me that she was getting the divorce and she was renting a house to live in, but he was buying some property and he was going to build her house. So I told him that when you get the property, because he said he had to tear a building down before he started to build a house. So I told him, when you get the property squared up, call me and I will come down and I will help you build that house. And he didn't believe me. Because what he didn't know was, in all my theater work and all this stuff, I had did an apprenticeship, and I was a carpenter too.

So, I came down and helped him build this house. And just happened this way that at the time we got to the point to where we were putting electric in, we couldn't get an electrician to do it in a timely manner.

All the electricians were backed up. So a friend of mine called me, he was in Florida, and he said, Hey man, how long are you going to be in Texas? I said, Yeah. He said, well, I'm coming through there. I said, Okay. And he was on the wing. I'm thinking, Damn, he's an electrician. So he gets here and I said, Babe, can you wire this house up for us? So he said, Yeah. So my dad had met the guy before. He was a dancer, but he was also an electrician's union. So I told him, I said, Babe can wire the house up for you, man. He'll wire it up for you in two days and be out of here.

So, Babe got started and my dad was hollering him like a straw boss. And after a couple hours he left him alone, and Babe wired that house up for a little bit of nothing. But anyway, I'm getting off the subject. But I came down to help my dad build a house. And by the time we built that house, I came down here in April. And then in September, October when we got the house built, I didn't want to leave because we had did one play and we were working on our second play. And I didn't want to leave. And then after that we did another play and another play and

we started getting different buildings and had to put all this stuff together and lights and sound. And it just kept growing.

And so, I'm here. Because even though I've had some bad experiences, I try not to dwell on them because it's all a part of life. And if you think of the science, the positive and the negative, there's going to be that in everything. The yin and the yang, there's going to be the good and the bad. So you got to have this and for that. But all in all, the journey has been great because I've been fortunate because I've been able to live my life on my terms, more or less on my terms.

I remember a man, Brigardo Groves, and he was a paraplegic and he was one of the most energetic people that you ever want to meet. And what he always said was, Create your own spectacular. Because when you first looked at him, you would think, Oh, yeah man, let me help you with that. Oh hey man, I got this, I got this. He would come in, man, and before you know it, man, this cat, he be DJing or directing a play or producing a player or something. And he always said, Create your own spectacular. You can't sit around dwelling on what's happening. If you want to do something, get out there and do it. And so I've been able to do that and it's made my journey enjoyable.

Yeah. So it's the whole journey. I don't chop it up into segments because without one part of it wouldn't lead to another.

**Cleottice Greer Walton**... child and my husband was a teacher and they were glad I came from New Jersey recruiting school teachers because they had had riots in New Jersey, and they had something called defacto segregation where they were trying to get more black teachers into the schools. And he came to New Jersey recruiting teachers. And my husband was one that was recruited. And we moved to New Jersey and stayed there for, gee, almost 40 years. And at first I found it very, very different, because even though it was supposed to be integrated here, it was from a segregated society and it was just different. But I learned to adjust to it. And he was teaching, he taught in an integrated school.

They had something there called a tracking system. And he was a math teacher. And most of the kids, they had track one, track two, track three. And most of the kids in track three were African American kids. And then in track two, where the kids that were pretty good, he had a young guy that was very, very smart, but he was in track two. He was the type of guy that when my husband went home at night, he had to study to keep up with this guy. Then he had a girl that should have been in track three, but she was in track two because she was the mayor's daughter. And as he said, you go in thinking there really wasn't that much difference. And after I went there, I went to school and then I worked in a hospital for almost 30 years. And then when we retired, we came back here because all my family was here.

I think when you talk about journeys, and I know both of us thought that when we left here, we weren't going to go full circle and come back. Because I never intended to come back.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.:** Live here again.

**Cleottice Greer Walton:** Live here again. But I wouldn't take anything for the years that I spent away because it really changed my life. And when you come back and you see some of the people that never left, you know what a valuable experience that you've had. Because some people will say to me, Where did you grow up? And I said, I was born in Texas, I was born in Mineola, but I really grew up in New Jersey. Because when we left, we were basically kids, but with all the experiences, and I wouldn't take anything for any of them, the good and the bad. And even though with segregation and you think back and we've discussed some of the things, and that's all in the past. And you can't let your past define who you are because you have to always be searching for something better, in a better way. And when I came back, I did find that things had changed tremendously and it makes you feel good that you can be part of that change.

**Mathew Greer, Jr.:** Yeah.

**Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution**