

# Renée James Gilmore: A History of Political Engagement, Florida

As told by Renée James Gilmore  
Sarasota, Florida

## Introduction:

In early 2020 (just weeks before the pandemic), Smithsonian staff and their storytelling partners at the Peale, Baltimore, traveled to multiple states in the U.S. to ask residents of those states about voting experiences, the current state of American democracy, what issues brought them to the polls, how they made a difference in their communities, and what Americans' civic responsibilities were, among other complex questions.

## Story Narrative:

**Renée James Gilmore:** Florida has had a not so stellar record of being open to voting whether we have laws or not have laws. But my family, as I said, came here to Florida at the turn of the last century. They came around 1913, so we have a long history here. And that was far before people of color had the right to vote, black specifically, and far before women had the right to vote.

My great-grandmother, who I am so blessed to have shared the same space with Ms. Miriama Jones, she had been here since the twenties. And my great-grandmother was one of the few women, even now, that I would say was a strong business woman and strong civic engagement kind of person. So my great-grandmother talked with me about the importance of women being engaged and being responsible for our own destinies and taking charge of our own destinies.

And so having her talk to me, even as a kid, just having conversations, not like, "Let's sit down and have a conversation about voting, or let's sit down and have a conversation about you being black or being a woman, but let's just talk." We just talked about everything.

She was a business owner, drove, owned a yellow cab, if you will. And so, I got to see lots of Florida from that yellow cab. So, we would go to places where, as an example, City Hall.

As a kid, I wondered why am I seven years old sitting in City Hall because all the other girls are outside playing? Or when I was in high school going with my father to school board meetings. And at that point in time, you couldn't just watch school board meetings by way of closed circuit television or television, you needed to go be at the meetings.

And the other thing about that, even so my father, my grandparents were always about, "You have to be present." You can't read about it. And my father was a journalist and he would say, "You don't need a filter. You need to see it for yourself, hear it for yourself so

that you can make your own assessments about what's real, what's exaggerated and what's not at all."

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