



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **FEBRUARY 'FACE' WORKING TO PRESERVE LOCAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY**

**Uniontown, PA** – Dr. Norma Thomas started out wanting to preserve her own history. She ended up working to preserve African-American history throughout the Uniontown area.

“In terms of looking at history, and looking at the African-American history of the region, I started out because I was doing genealogy research in my own family,” Thomas said. “We have been here since the early 1800s, and possibly before that, but there’s not a lot of documented history of African-Americans in the region. That started me on a journey from my own research to collecting more about black history in this area.”

Thomas has an extensive background in social work and has received numerous community service awards.

Thomas’s dedication to preserving the history of the African-American community in Uniontown and beyond has earned her the title of February “Face” in the Fayette County Public Relations Initiative’s Faces and Places series.

Thomas is committed to making sure that history doesn’t get lost, as sometimes happens when elder members of the community pass away. Not only are their stories lost, but sometimes, personal artifacts are thrown away by family members who don’t see their worth. So, Thomas collects what she can, talking to elderly people and their family members as often as possible to record their stories, and picking up bag after bag of personal possessions through which she must sort.

She collates it into a sort of history museum.

“I put together a traveling history museum and displayed what I have,” she said. “Now, the discussion is with the John Wesley AME Zion Church.”

Thomas said the church, located on Uniontown’s East Main Street, features tunnels in the basement which were a part of the Underground Railroad.

“It just seemed quite a natural place to have the permanent collection, so that’s what we’re trying to do now,” she said.

Thomas said the East End of Uniontown once featured many thriving African-American businesses, some of which she remembers, and some of which she has heard about through the stories of people she has met along her journey.

“There is a lot of history here. It just has to be uncovered,” she said, noting her frustration when she reads accounts or views documentaries on the history of Uniontown and Fayette County, only to find no mention of African-American history anywhere therein. “Our history has not made it into the breadth and depth of the history of this city.”

So, the Uniontown native, now a resident of Hopwood, is reaching out to the community in as many ways as possible, writing down oral histories, researching, and even attempting to reach out via video messaging.

She has gotten a great deal of help from her daughter, Dr. Raina Leon, who is now based in Philadelphia. Leon is a writer and educator who shares her mother’s interest in genealogical research, as well as her desire to preserve people’s stories and help them achieve as much as possible.

In 2019, the two founded StoryJoy, Inc., a “consulting and educational agency that supports the development of scholars, human service providers, and creatives, particularly those coming from historically marginalized communities (BIPOC, queer, disabled, etc.),” according to the website.

StoryJoy offers “organizational workshops (especially around diversity, equity, inclusion), creative practice workshops, workshops around genealogical research, dissertation and rank and tenure document reviews and feedback, and individualized coaching for leadership and creative growth.”

Thomas said StoryJoy’s creation is rooted in something Leon once said to her.

“My siblings and I were talking about our youth, and she said, ‘You had such joy when you were telling those stories,’” Thomas said.

Though StoryJoy’s purpose is to help members of marginalized communities in many ways, including giving them the tools to navigate the complex process of defending a doctoral dissertation, when it gets right down to it, it’s often about, well, stories.

“We help marginalized groups to tell their stories,” Thomas said. “Whatever that means, we’re trying to help people tell their stories.”

Thomas said genealogy is something of a family interest, with one family reunion drawing 400 relatives because “people were hungry to know about their history.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a temporary end to those family reunions, as well as making it harder for Thomas to gather personal accounts of local history. An increase in the number of elderly people dying means stories are lost at a greater rate, and more personal artifacts are in danger of being discarded. But Thomas is doing her best to collect those artifacts, and with them, more history and more stories.

“They’re just stories,” she said. “Then you realize, somebody values those stories.”

Anyone who has a personal history to share or items to donate to the museum can contact Thomas at [normathomas13@gmail.com](mailto:normathomas13@gmail.com).

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.FayetteCountyPA.org](http://www.FayetteCountyPA.org).

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