

The Zest S13E4

Arthenia: [00:00:00] You know, the Constitution says the pursuit of happiness and all of that. Well, we wanted to pursue it for us and our people. Yeah. And this was our opportunity.

Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: Citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State.

Today, civil rights history is on the menu.

We talk a lot about restaurants on this podcast, obviously, but did you know that in 1960 I would have been legally prohibited from eating in most Tampa restaurants due to the color of my skin? But that all changed after a group of courageous high school students staged a series of sit-ins to protest the policy.

On February 29th, 1960, they held their first sit-in at the Woolworth department store in downtown Tampa, and by September of that same year, a total of 18 department stores in [00:01:00] Tampa had desegregated their lunch counters. The events are chronicled in the documentary *Triumph: Tampa's Untold chapter in the Civil Rights Movement*.

It's produced by W-E-D-U-P-B-S. Yes, you might know me from there as well. And you can watch the film for absolutely free at wedu.org/triumph. There's also a link to the film in the show notes. Now, one of those teenage protesters was Arthenia Joyner, and if her name sounds familiar, it's because she's everywhere.

She went on to be an attorney, a Florida State senator, and an icon in Tampa's Civil Rights history. There's even a library named for her. I recently visited Senator Joyner at her office in Ybor City where she still practices law. In this conversation, she recalls why she was eager to participate in the sit-ins, despite the danger.

She shares some of her favorite local places to eat these days, and I'm so thankful that she offers [00:02:00] a word of encouragement for these turbulent times.

Arthenia: Well. I was in 11th grade then, and I was 17. I was on the cheerleading squad. I was in the Red Cross. I was a patrol force girl. I just

loved, uh, being involved and, and I loved school and I especially loved it when it rained. I said, I gotta go to school, you know? There were few kids there on rainy days, and so you just got a chance to interact with everybody one-on-one.

I just loved going to school.

Dalia: Oh, I like that.

Arthenia: Yes.

Dalia: Okay, so that was you personally. Now. In the city of Tampa where you were living, what was going on then? Because a lot of people listening either weren't around at that time or weren't here in Tampa at that [00:03:00] time. So what was the situation like in Tampa in 1960?

Where could you go? Where could you not go?

Arthenia: Okay, well, 1960, I was in 11th grade. My father owned a nightclub on Central Avenue called The Cotton Club, and so every day after school I would go to the club as, as we called it, but. I was a, a member of the NAACP Youth Council at that time, and I was, uh, a member of the Student Government Association, which was led by George Edgecomb, and George Edgecomb was the first black judge in Hillsborough County, Florida.

One day, George came and said, there's a young man here. A young barber who is trying to get some students to go down and sit in at Woolworths, and he's seeking 20 students from Middleton and 20 students from [00:04:00] Blake. And George was president of the student body, so he asked him to assist him, and George asked me if I would like to be one of the students.

Well, I was known as being very loquacious, always talking. So George came to me, he said, I got 19. You can be number 20. And the reason why I'm so late asking you is because the whole town would've known it before you all even started the march down because you talk so much. And we laughed about it. And, but it was serious.

And so I said, yes, I, I wanna do it. Um. Because back in fifth grade when Brown V Board was decided by the Supreme Court that said. Separate schools were not equal. It was unconstitutional. And so my teacher then was Doris Ross Reddick. And Doris Ross Reddick was the first black [00:05:00] female, uh, elected to the Hillsborough County School Board and.

We talked about it in school in general, realities that the Supreme Court had passed this law that said separate was not equal, and that there was some brilliant lawyers who had represented Brown, and the lead lawyer was Thurgood Marshall. And as we talked about it. I said, I wanna be a lawyer like Thurgood Marshall so I can fight for equality and justice for my people.

So from fifth grade, I knew then what my purpose in life would be, and that was to fight for dignity, respect, justice, equality, just because we knew that we were. Equal to others, just as good as anybody else in America. So in 11th grade, this was my opportunity to put my thoughts and and desires into [00:06:00] action.

Oh, so when he asked me, I said yes. And of course I ran it by my parents and my dad was a bit reticent and he said, I don't think you need to do this. And, and my mom said. Do what your conscience dictates. If this is a conviction that you believe in, then do it. Don't worry about your dad. My dad was 20 years older than my mom, so it was a generational thing.

He had lived during the depression and all of that, and so consequently he had always been. A victim of discrimination and prejudice, and it had a different meaning to him. Here we were young and wanted to fight the system, and so I joined the group and. Went to Woolworths and sat in.

Dalia: Amazing. And it makes so much sense that you were surrounded by all of these firsts because you, yourself are a first, the first black female to practice law in Hillsborough County, [00:07:00] if I'm not mistaken.

Arthenia: Yes.

Dalia: So that's incredible. Okay. I know there's a, a 20-year-old listening going, what the heck is Woolworth? And, and why was there a sit-in? So can you just give some backstory? It's a department store that also had a lunch counter, is that right?

Arthenia: Yes. And they sold clothes and artifacts. Anything you wanted you could buy in Woolworths.

It was like, uh, a, a sixties Woolworths a a Walmart of sorts. Yeah. You know, they sold everything and we could buy anything, but we could not go and sit at that lunch counter and be served and purchase a meal.

Dalia: Why was that so important?

Arthenia: It was important because we were being discriminated against, and we wanted the world in Tampa to know that now was the time to afford and accord us a dignity and respect to all people.

And that's why I was imparted [00:08:00] to me because I was living in a segregated society and the signs were white and colored everywhere you went. And, and I, I. I knew this was wrong and so did the others, and we were all ready to fight for what we believed in and what was right. Mm.

Dalia: And you couldn't even try on the clothes.

Arthenia: Oh, no. No. You, you, we called it window shopping. You would go and look. You could buy, but you couldn't try on, uh, you couldn't eat, you couldn't get a drink. You know, stores like WT Grants, Cress, Woolworths, and a few others they had for water fountains. And one said white and one said colored. And, and that was it.

And, and we were at a point no, no more. It's our time now.

Dalia: Yeah.

Arthenia: And, and so. We assembled at St. Paul AME [00:09:00] Church, but we were led by one visionary, brilliant black young man who was a barber, and that was Clarence Ford.

Dalia: Oh, I know him.

Arthenia: Yes. And Clarence is right here and he lives in Progress Village. And he is the person who had the vision and he said, well, they're standing up for their rights in, in North Carolina and, and so we should do the same here in Tampa.

And he approached the Reverend Lowry of the NAACP. And at first there was some reticence in. He said, okay, let me think about it, or whatever. But initially Clarence said, regardless as to what they decide, we're gonna do this. And then the NAACP, Mr. Mr. Uh, Reverend Lowry said yes. He came and told him, yes, we're gonna lend down name and participate.

And that was the beginning [00:10:00] of of the sit in at FW Woolworths, which is the same place, the same company that had a store in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the four black men had the first sit in on February 1st, 1960. This was February 29th, was our first day.

Dalia: So what exactly did you do? I've never participated in a sit-in.

Is it literally just you go and you sit there and they're not serving you food, right?

Arthenia: No, they didn't serve us food. We, we assembled at St. Paul AME Church. We were given instructions. We knew that there could possibly be violence, but we were told this is going to be nonviolent on our part if they. Do anything, you turn the other cheek.

We are not going to engage in any violence. So we assembled and we marched a few blocks from St. Paul [00:11:00] to Woolworths on the corner of Franklin and Polk Street. And, and we went in and we sat. Now there were people down there and some didn't like it. And the one thing I recall is that some man spit on Clarence's jacket?

That was probably the only negative thing about it. The mayor was Julian Lane. He made sure that the Tampa police protected us.

Dalia: Now that's unique, isn't it?

Arthenia: Very unique. And that is, and, and, and that is where the term, the Tampa Technique originated from. Because as far as we know, and we, as we believe that we were the only, uh, sit in, in the nation where the police protected the protestors and, uh, they stood behind us and to make sure that nobody accosted us.

There were people there that you knew didn't have your best interests at [00:12:00] heart, just by observation. And I remember Carmen Gwon saying she remembered this man had a stick in his hand and he kept hitting his other hand with it, but nothing happened to us. We just sat there and they put up the signs, lunch counter closed after we asked.

After we said we wanted to purchase a meal and they said our lunch counter closed. So we sat there for hours and hours and finally at some point we left.

Dalia: So they would rather close the lunch counter than serve you?

Arthenia: Yes.

Dalia: So then how do you get from that to the lunch counters eventually being desegregated?

Arthenia: Oh, well, this was February the 29th, come September of that same year. You know, we had a mayor who believed that all people are equal and we are gonna treat everybody the same. So he fought, he had a biracial committee [00:13:00] with, uh, Reverend Lowry being a member, and Mr. Saunders in NAACP State field Secretary.

And so. They met with all the business people and over a period of six months, the Woolworths, the Crest, the grants, and all of the other places, and they were able to negotiate a settlement, which meant that they were gonna open the lunch counters to black people and that. It's how it came to be that subsequently the beaches, all of the restaurants opened up their doors and black people were allowed to come in, purchase and be treated just like everybody else.

Now it took time. Remember it was from, uh, six months or so before it occurred. And then as students, we were. The [00:14:00] initiators of this through the leadership of Clarence in the NAACP, later adults got involved. And, uh, if I recall correctly, Ms. Uh, Curtis Wilson, former owner Wilson's Funeral home, uh, said she was in that first group of adults.

And they would go to these restaurants two by two. It, it wasn't a thousand at one time. There would be different restaurants with different groups of twos going, and it opened up and the rest is history in Tampa, desegregated without any chaos.[00:15:00]

Dalia: Do you remember the first time you went to Woolworth, sat at the counter and had a meal?

Arthenia: Well, my father loved breakfast and he. Took me to have a meal later after we had gotten to the point where everything was opened up. September, I think we went a few weeks after it opened up. It was as though it had been that way all the time that everybody could go in and buy.

I mean, this is the place where we spent money. People bought hats, people bought stockings, people bought everything they needed that Woolworths and Cress and Grant's had, you know, they called them the five and Dime stores and all of that, but they had just everything in there, from [00:16:00] toiletries to clothes to whatever, and.

We spent lots of money in those doors. It was just wonderful that we got to the conclusion. A successful conclusion of the effort that started with 40 black students, 20 from Middleton and 20 from Blake. The Blake president was

Shafter Scott, who is a preacher, and he lives in Plant City right now. George, unfortunately died in 1976 when he was 33 years old.

At that time, he was a judge and all, but so he made his mark. You know, he stood up and selected us and then he went on to college and came in to law school and came home and he was the first black, they called it. During that time you were a county solicitor and then the legislature changed the laws to.

[00:17:00] Every, to make it the same all over the state. Different counties had different names. You had the, you had the justice of, the peace you had who didn't have to be a lawyer. Just, we just had so many different courts and laws, uh, ordinances in these respective communities. And once they passed this law and made it state attorneys and all, well then George, uh.

Went from being a county solicitor to a state attorney, and he was hired by EJ Salsines, and the rest is history. And then I came in at that point and nobody hired me, so I became. Arthenia Joyner's boss by opening my own office.

Dalia: You did all right?

Arthenia: Yes sir.

Dalia: You did. All right. For yourself, do you remember that first breakfast at Woolworth with your dad?

Do you remember what you ordered? Do you remember the conversation? Because your dad, you said, did not want you to [00:18:00] participate in the protest and now here he is at the breakfast counter.

Arthenia: Yeah. Well, the, everything had changed. We were allowed to go in, so I said, let's take advantage of it. And you know, I had my usual bacon and eggs and toast.

Um, you know, I was pretty predictable. Yeah. About my breakfast.

Dalia: Yeah. We just did a sound check. I asked you would you have a breakfast, you said, I usually have bacon, eggs, and toast

Arthenia: and, but at home and grits

Dalia: and grits. Very important

Arthenia: then and now I can eat grits every day. I love them.

Dalia: Yeah. Okay, so there were so many places that have been desegregated that I think a lot of people take for granted, and it wasn't even that long ago.

I mean, you mentioned water fountains and beaches and theaters and all these places. Why in particular do you think a restaurant is so important. I mean, I'm thinking like you literally didn't have a seat at the table.

Arthenia: Well, we sat at the table, but we couldn't eat at the table. 'cause it, [00:19:00] it was important because that was the center of downtown.

You go shopping, you want to eat, stop and eat. I have a drink or get a cup of coffee and. They were, uh, the beneficiaries of, of our funds. We were helping the economy. We were helping their businesses to be sustained by buying all of the other items that they had to offer. But it was the most visible place that you couldn't go in and eat and you could spend your money to buy anything else.

And it was only fair and right that we should be able to enjoy everything that that facility accorded to everybody else. It was a matter of dignity and respect and being treated the same way. You know, the Constitution says happiness and the pursuit of happiness and all of that. Well, we wanted to pursue it for [00:20:00] us and our people.

And this was our opportunity, and I'm telling you, as I talked to some of the other people who participated, Barbara Wright, Leroy Long, Wilbert Mathis, Senator Jimmy Hargrett, all of us talked about how much we wanted to do what we did because we took the position that now was our time. Mm. Yes.

Dalia: Okay with that position, what do you say to a young person today who feels like the world is spinning outta control?

One person or 40 people can't make a difference. What's your pep talk for them?

Arthenia: One person can make a difference. There's a role for everybody. There's something that we all can do. If I took the position. 65 years ago that my going wouldn't make a difference, then where would we be? We have made substantial progress [00:21:00] from 19, uh, 60 to 2026, but we didn't take the position that.

We would do nothing. We took the position that we would fight for what we believed in come hell or high water, and that's still my position today. Not

withstanding the chaos that surrounding America and the world, but here at home, as I see some of the accomplishments that we've made and the fact that.

The president administration is eroding those. It's not going to stop me from fighting to bring it back to where it ought to be. 'cause I made up my mind that, you know, I survived. There was no violence. But if in the end, if it comes down to my being out there and being failed by a bullet or [00:22:00] whatever, you will know that.

Joyner fought with every five of her being down to the very end, we cannot give up. We have to fight for what we want. America belongs to us. We made this country what it is, and the young people who are enjoying all of what we fought for in the sixties need to know and understand that. They came in the world and are enjoying the fruits of our labor, and now it's time for them to labor and get in the vineyards.

It could be making a phone call. It could be contributing. It, it. It can be running for office, it can be getting people to the polls, but most importantly, everybody's got to vote because there are consequences to elections, but we cannot afford to do nothing.

Dalia: Mm, yes. Okay. Oh, I needed this. I needed this [00:23:00] conversation.

You're like the auntie. You're everybody's auntie. You know, like giving us some encouragement. So thank you for your time. Before I let you go, I have to ask you about today. So, you know, 60 years ago you wanted to be able to go to Woolworth and get that breakfast plate. Where are some of your favorite places to eat now in Tampa?

Arthenia: Well, I try them all. I've been from. Every black restaurant, Mr. B's, I, I've had their oxtails and I love them. And I go to Big John's Barbecue and get, and I've been going for years and years to get a rib sandwich, uh, uh, barbecue chicken. I always end up wanting. The soul food. And then I have friends who are good cooks like Mona Newsome.

I'm knocking on her door every day, Mona, what's on the menu today? So I become a steady there. [00:24:00] My friends all know that I don't cook, but I love to eat. Well. Single woman has no business. Cutting on a stove and running up all that electricity just to make one meal. So I, uh, I indulge my friends by visiting them, and they, my next door neighbor, Sidney, oh my God, that young woman cooks and every other day there she is with a meal.

For me, I've been blessed with good friends and, uh, my. Sorority buddy Estella Gray, Estella Cook, and bring me a meal. So I get a lot of home cooking, but I go out to the soul food restaurants and to others. I've been to, you know, the Pearl, I've been to Burns, I've been to J. Alexander's, uh uh, I remember when Carrabba's was first opened.

I tried them, but at the end of the day. I want that soulful [00:25:00] fried chicken, collard greens, rice, mac, and cheese, and. Somebody cooks that almost every week. 'cause my mom did every Sunday. My dad brought home 10 to 12 people for dinner. So she cooked a lot. And my best meals were home from my best cooking. My life was my mom, which I did not, uh, get that talent, but.

I've just been blessed with good friends with good food and a nice glass of red wine. And if it's a special occasion, we have some bubbly and people ask, what do I, like I said, from Bel to Christal, champagne is champagne. I love it. I've just been blessed. To, to have good friends and to have the ability to go out and eat on occasions, but I'd [00:26:00] rather have a home cooked meal and top it off with a dessert from the pound cake that, that Bishop Thomas Scott cooks a mean pound cake.

So I'm a, I'm a neighborhood girl who. It is been blessed to get food from all of my friends. I'm thankful for the blessing of being bestowed with such wonderful people in my life.

Dalia: Oh, that's beautiful. And a nice slice of pound cake with some red wine to go with your red outfit. Thank you. But you know, I think that's beautiful because.

People are feeding you and you are nourishing the entire community in a different way. So thank you. It's always good to see you.

Arthenia: You are welcome. Thank you so much for having me.

Dalia: Arthenia. Joyner was one of the participants of the 1960 Woolworth Lunch counter sit-ins in Tampa. She's also an attorney and a former [00:27:00] Florida State Senator.

I wanna thank her so much for her time, and thanks to all of the Courage 40 who have made our world a better place. And again, their story is told in the documentary *Triumph: Tampa's Untold Chapter in the Civil Rights Movement*.

You can watch the film for free at wedu.org/triumph or find the link in the show notes of this episode.

I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF, copyright 2026, part of the NPR network.