

From the Segregated South to SHS and Beyond

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One of the star alumnae of SHS is federal judge Ojetta Rogerie Thompson '69, whose parents never actually lived in Scarsdale. Judge Thompson, an African-American who spent most of her childhood in segregated South Carolina during the 1950s and 1960s, was selected for the Scarsdale branch of STEP, the Student Transfer Education Program, in 1967, entering SHS as a junior. STEP allows individuals from less affluent communities to benefit from a Scarsdale education for the last two years of high school.

Judge Thompson is the first African-American woman to serve as a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. She was nominated by President Barack Obama in 2009, after having served as the first African-American woman justice for the Rhode Island Superior Court.

Childhood

Thompson's early years were spent in a town that was not at all like Scarsdale. "I lived in a really close-knit community in South Carolina," recalled Thompson. "It was the kind of neighborhood where everyone knew each other on the streets, and all the kids played together, and people always watched out for one another."

In South Carolina Thompson attended a segregated high school and "during that time the state just simply did not provide African-American schools the same resources as other schools in South Carolina," she noted. "In a biology class you might have three or four students using one microscope."

She suffered a major blow at age eight, when her father passed away. "My mom took care of me and my older sister after my father died, along with the rest of the community and our church," noted Thompson.

The Move to SHS

It wasn't until the summer before her junior year that Thompson learned about STEP. Thompson proceeded to file an application and was accepted into the program.

Thompson did not move to Scarsdale because she was unhappy with her life in South Carolina. "I consider myself to be a pretty adventurous person, and I was ready for something new. I was given the opportunity at [the] precise moment that I felt ready to move on to something else," she said.

Despite her openness to new experiences, when Thompson arrived in Scarsdale, she experienced a culture shock.

"It was very scary because not only was I leaving home, but I was going to a community that was 180 degrees different than [the one] where I grew up, with a family that I had never met," Thompson remembered. "It was just the culture shock of trying to adjust to my family and the new school, trying to make friends with people who also viewed you as something very curious because most of Scarsdale had not had a lot of interaction with black people."

The economic and political realities of Scarsdale were also new to Thompson. "I had never seen an entire community that had so much wealth," she recalled. "I remember that Edgewood was considered to be the poor section of Scarsdale, but for a poor section, it was definitely a lot wealthier than many places that I'd seen in South Carolina."

Scarsdale residents were also, in general, more accepting of African Americans than the white population in Thompson's home state. "The South at times felt... really repressive for African

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was doing there and not importantly [whether] I was going to hang in there and finish it out," said Thompson. "...There were times when I felt lonely and alienated, but there were other times when I really enjoyed the people I came to know, and the family was a very nice family."

Thompson's host family, the Johnsons, had five children—three boys and two girls. Her host father, Pete, was an editor at the New York Times, and her host mother, Jane, was an English teacher at White Plains High School. Jennifer, the oldest daughter, was the same age as Judge Thompson, which made the transition easier.

"... Although they were strange to me, I was also strange to them, but they were always very nice," said Thompson. Over time, Thompson developed many new relationships. "I managed to make friends with a lot of friends of the girl who I was living with, [and] also just through interaction in class, and I attended the Congregational Church."

Many teachers at SHS had a long-lasting impact on Thompson. "I had excellent teachers at Scarsdale," she stated. "I remember in particular Mr. [Werner] Feig who taught history.... He was definitely a standout teacher for me, and I remember Mr. [Roger] Cappucci, who taught math, and Mr. [Eric] Rothschild, who taught history."

Thompson has stayed in touch with several teachers from Scarsdale, along with her friends and host family. At Thompson's swearing in for the Federal Court, "there was a crowd from Scarsdale that came, and I was just so happy to see them all and it meant so much that they all came," she exclaimed.

Thompson has few negative memories of SHS, but one such memory is of her college application process. "I was in the process of planning for college, and I went to talk to the guidance counselor who discouraged me from applying to Pembroke," then the women's college of Brown University, Thompson recalled. "She didn't think I could get in, but it just didn't seem like quite the appropriate thing to say to a student from my perspective. I know the guidance counselors are supposed to be realistic, but they should also be encouraging at the same time." Ultimately, Thompson applied to Pembroke anyway and was admitted.

According to Thompson, there were some SHS students who held a prejudice against the four blacks in the school, but they tended to "stay clear of us, and we stayed clear of them," she said. "No one ever tried to bully us. They would just make some nasty remarks sometimes, but you learned pretty quickly that you can't let those kinds of things bother you, and you just have to go on with your life and stay focused on your ultimate goals."

To College and Beyond

Thompson believes that SHS is what prepared her well for college. "...[SHS] is a very academically challenging high school, so it made my transition to Pembroke much easier," she said.

It was at Pembroke that Thompson first thought about going into law. "I started exploring the law, and there was a lot going on in the Supreme Court at the time that I was very aware of," she remembered. "I was interested in legal professions in general and decided to apply to law school." If Thompson had not gone to SHS, her life might have gone in a very different direction. "Before I left South Carolina, I thought that I was going to go to the same college that my sister went to in North Carolina, and if I had not gone to Scarsdale I don't think I would have attended Pembroke," Thompson said. If she had not gone to Pembroke, Thompson believes that she would not have gone into law.

Thompson believes that her time in Scarsdale was an enriching experience. "I was able to do so many things that I would not have been able to do in South Carolina, and on the whole, people were kind, considerate, and welcoming," she said.

By Caroline Kristof

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