

In spite of February being the shortest month of the year, the impact of Black History Month valiantly prevails while providing opportunities for everyone to reflect on the past and future. Appreciation is a timeless activity, but February's focus on the indispensable contributions from African-Americans throughout history transcends your average tip-of-the-hat.

Figures like Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou and Barack Obama oft appear in a conversation sparked by Black History Month. Fernandina Beach has its own homegrown historic figure to enshrine, former Vice Mayor Patricia Thompson.

Born June 24, 1955, in Fernandina Beach, Thompson remembers her childhood with an unshakable fondness. Her father, Elliott "Tex" McGowan, made a name for himself in this community as one of the first Black contractors for Rayonier and as a handyman for their white neighbors.

"He was well known, and they always would give us things like bicycles, food, and we could share with our neighbors who were basically poor," she said. "We grew up in a home full of love, and we learned how to share early."

Thompson attended Peck High School prior to segregation; however, she proudly boasts that her father's good standing with the community helped her school integrate sooner than the rest of the country. After pursuing an associate's degree in child development at Florida State Community College, she joined the Exceptional Student Education program for the Nassau County School District.

"A lot of the paraprofessional teachers didn't want to work with them, and I said, 'If I can just get in there and make a difference,'" she said. "I love working with the emotionally handicapped and all of those with special needs, because I felt like I was giving more of me back."

Following her stint working in the public school system, Thompson became an activist through her efforts with the historic NAACP. She quickly rose through the ranks to become president of Nassau County's NAACP chapter to advocate for her local African-American community.

"We were just making sure that everyone was treated fair," she said. "Even growing up before integration, I feel that Fernandina treated Blacks fair, but not equal. With that in mind, I just wanted to make sure that I could let other races know about other races, so I found myself at an early age telling whites about Blacks – who we are. If we get cut, we bleed like you bleed."

An incident in 1994 resulting in the death of 33-year-old Dennis Wilson, an unarmed Black motorist, sparked even more activism in Thompson. Wilson was stopped by city police officers Jim Norman and Danny Bell after an illegal left turn. A glitch in their computer wrongly indicated there was a warrant for Wilson's arrest.

After refusing to exit his vehicle, Wilson was shot multiple times by the officers who claimed to fear for their lives. An investigation into this incident said it was "justified in the use of deadly force."

"It was excessive. They wanted to kill him," Thompson said.

As a leading figure in the local NAACP chapter, she organized peaceful demonstrations with then-mayor Eleanor Coleman. Coleman spoke out against the shooting and was set to march with the NAACP to the courthouse, but a surprising cancer diagnosis forced her to bow out. Her focus then shifted to the future of Fernandina Beach – getting Thompson, a Black woman, elected to city government.

"Everywhere I went, people said, 'You ought to run for city government. You talk a lot. You would be a good city commissioner.' The Lord spoke to my heart and told me to do it. Just like (Coleman) promised me, her constituents supported me," Thompson said. "But I'm not saying everybody, because when you go to vote you don't know who to vote for, but I won by a landslide."

Thompson officially became the first Black female city commissioner in 1999. Her lifelong passion for racial equality made her a unique presence in a predominantly white city government.

"I felt that I didn't do as much as I could have done because being a city commissioner is not as easy as people think it is. They bring a big book days before the meeting, and you're supposed to know what's in that book," Thompson said. "The best thing I did was when I didn't know what to say, I didn't say anything. But, when I knew what I was talking about I made it my point. And I had to make a correction to many people. They referred to me as the 'Black commissioner.'"

Thompson became vice mayor of Fernandina Beach in 2000. A particularly contentious, but undeniably crucial, piece of action undertaken by Thompson was the renaming of Elm Street. She felt that this community severely lacked acknowledgment to the revolutionary activist Martin Luther King Jr. Thompson suggested the city use Elm Street as an opportunity to rectify the issue.

"Here it is, the year 2000, and everybody talks about Dr. King, but we don't have no representation of him," she said.

The ordinance she proposed was met with reluctance bordering on outright objection from her fellow city commissioners. They pointed out that the streets are all named after trees and wanted to keep that consistent. Thompson, however, wholeheartedly disagreed.

"You mean to tell me in the year 2000 we feel that a tree is more important than a man who gave his life for all of us to come together sitting at the table of brotherlyhood (sic), and you all think a tree is more important?" Thompson said. "I don't know that in the city I really love we've got almost unlovable people here. You've got to learn how to love the ones who don't want you to love."

Her unwavering dedication to this ordinance resulted in a dual name for Elm Street with Martin Luther King Jr. Street attached. Thompson was also instrumental in changing the name of her local recreation center to honor MLK, which she believes encouraged more white people to visit.

"Back in the day, we still called this the Black recreation center, and on Atlantic Avenue, there was the white recreation center. For racial reasons, to bring us together, they probably will come. So that was my rationale," she remembers.

These efforts did not go unnoticed. In 2018, the recreation center chose to name its auditorium after Thompson, who spent much of her early life volunteering there.

"I started thinking everything that I've done in Fernandina, it wasn't for me," she said. "It was for somebody else. And sometimes you think, my goodness, you try to help and some people still don't care. But even though you have pity parties, you got to keep marching on till victory is won."

Thompson left city government in 2002, but she jumped back into the ring when Bill Leeper was elected sheriff of Nassau County in 2012. Leeper personally asked her to join his transition team.

"I was the only Black (person) on his transition team and that was one of the biggest honors that I achieved in my life, because I'm like, 'Why is he picking me out of everybody else?'" Thompson said. "He said, 'I watched you for years, and I had to have you on my team because you give good advice and you got common sense.'"

Nowadays, Thompson remains a staple in this community through her church efforts and as president of Nassau County's Democratic Black Caucus. A life spent fighting for the good of all peoples doesn't just stop when the campaign trail ends. As long as there's a soul out there in need of help, Thompson will be at the ready when the call comes in.

"If I'm going to have trouble, I want it to be good trouble," she said. "I want someone to remember me by saying she always tried to help us to come together."