

Outstanding Florida Memorial University Personality

Interview with Dr. Rose Thevenin, Assistant Professor of History, Florida Memorial University

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Dr. Rose Thevenin, at left, with Prof. Dr. Angela Davis, a well known activist in the 1960s, at Florida International University when Dr. Davis spoke there a few weeks ago.

UA: "What were your dreams and aspirations as a teenager?"

RT: "My dream was to become a very famous fashion designer. I studied fashion designing for a little while, I studied art for a little while and then when I went to college I just became very, very interested in criminal justice and pursued that as a major, but I also had an interest in history so I did a dual major in history. I have a B.S. in Criminal Justice and a B.A in History with a minor in African American history."

UA: "Are you Haitian by birth or were you born in America?"

RT: "Haitian by birth, my whole family is from Haiti. I was born and raised in Haiti and I came to the U.S. when I was nine."

UA: "What are your fondest memories of Haiti?"

RT: "My fondest memories are of Flag Day where when we celebrate the Haitian Revolution and they bring out all of the weapons from the Haitian revolution and parade that in the streets. That gives me the appreciation of who I am and what people from my country had accomplished and how they fought against French/Spanish domination is the proudest moment, I think. You know, we have to be proud of our heritage because we are a great people."

UA: "What do you think should be the best way for the U.S government to treat Haitian immigrants considering the U.S. need for security and Haitian's need to live without being victimized and to have the ability to earn a good living for their families?"

RT: "I think the U.S government needs to treat all immigrants equally and it needs to apply the same standards to Haitians as it applies to immigrants from other countries. Haitians are to be respected

because when they come off the boats, they are not treated equitably compared to the way they treat other groups. As far as the economic situation right now in Haiti, it's really bad. We are talking about people who are working for very low wages, and a country in which there are political, economic as well as social factors and limitations severely hampering the growth and development of Haiti. I think that the aid package that the United States provides could be increased to provide decent living conditions, to provide more housing, to provide a decent environment that will discourage people from leaving and risking their lives to come to the United States."

UA: "What single incident/experience shaped you most into who you are today?"

RT: "Oh wow! So many! (laughs) I would say one of my most memorable memories is of me going to class and I remember I was about six or seven and when we went to school (it was a convent school taught by European nuns). I remember that they were teaching us the story of Cain and Abel -which I use in my class and I use to teach to my students about concepts of race and differentiation - I remember we were being taught that Cain was black and Abel was white, Cain killed his brother, therefore Cain is evil and so I remember coming back home and my grandfather heard me say that story and said "No! That is incorrect because what are you saying about Cain, is that what you are saying about black people?" So, we have to question what we learn. We have to question the validity of conclusions and see how it affects your own development. That (experience) has shaped and encouraged me to question everything I read. I question the legitimacy, I question context, I question the motivations and objectives and whether it's in the historiography or whether it in the historical debate. I think that when we question or we read certain things that have been written about African Americans or things that have been written about Caribbean people, (or) Latin people, if we start to question the validity of some of those statements we can definitely make contributions in the debate."

UA: "When did your interest in history start?"

RT: "From that moment with my grandfather! (Dr. Thevenin chuckles) I began to question everything I read, everything about black people and when I went to college and we were learning about African American history and they were not talking about women, I asked my professor, Dr. Monroe Fordham (he is retired now from Buffalo State) "What happened to the women? How come gender is not being contextualized when looking at the Middle Passage or when we are looking at the Civil Rights Movement?" He said to me, "Well, that's something you can do you know!" and I thought about it, and I said, "No I'm gonna be a lawyer, you know, I'm not interested in this." He always told me I would be a great historian and right now Gender *is* being considered and analyzed and debated in historiography and so he said, because I could make these kind of conclusions, that I have the 'eye' for the documents and that made me want to become a historian."

UA: "What colleges and universities did you attend?"

RT: "I did my undergraduate education at Buffalo State. I did my Masters degree at the University of Miami, and I also did a Masters-in-Residence which basically means I took courses for a semester at the University of Florida in Gainesville. I graduated with my Ph.D. degree at Michigan State University. I should also mention that while I went to Buffalo State, I participated in an exchange program, where I went to study at Albany State University of New York for a semester."



Dr. Thevenin is seen here in July 2003 at Wheelock College, Boston, where she presented a paper on the Black Panther Party

UA: "You spent last summer doing research at Stanford University. Can you tell us something about the project you worked on and the experience itself?"

RT: "Well, Stanford was a great experience because, as you know, I specialize in the history of the Black Panther Party. I have done numerous presentations on the Black Panther Party and Stanford has the Black Panther Party Collection in their archives. That collection consists of all of the documents, basically, all the documents pertaining to the history of the party. It contains files of the founders of the party to rank and file members, to posters to intra party memoranda - it contains photographs of the Black Panthers, and it also contains FBI files which I also specialize in and they also have micro films, and recorded tape records of the Black Panther Party speeches, and so when I went to Stanford I had the opportunity to go there and examine those documents to be able to turn my dissertation into a book."

UA: "You have done some research on Florida Memorial University's history. Briefly explain what you found out that you did not know before."

RT: "When I began the project I wanted to find out who were the founders of Florida Memorial University, what is Florida Memorial University and where does it fit within the historiography of African American history and I found out that Sarah Blocker was only 22 years old when she began this Institution with Rev. J. T. Brown and the Rev. Matthew Gilbert. I found out also that Sarah Blocker was born in 1857 and some of the records were basically missing 20 years, which takes off 20 years off of her life and so I had to basically verify her birth date. While I was also researching that I documented her contributions to not only Florida Memorial University, but her contributions to the state of Florida and her contributions to African American Education in the state of Florida. I also researched Susie C. Holley. In fact, I have submitted an entry for their inclusion in the Oxford Encyclopedia for Black Women. I have submitted both of them for that and so it is being considered and I'm very proud of that and I'm learning a lot."

" I gave a speech at the First Bethel Church, basically telling people about her life and it was very, very well received. People are excited about the topic, people are excited about the life of Susie C. Holley and they want to contribute to the research. "They're like - "Wow!" When are you coming over for the interview?", and I tell them, "No, not yet! I have to do the preliminaries first!", but people really want to tell their stories, but before we interview, there is a lot of matters you have to address."



Dr. Rose Thevenin with Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party in Atlanta Georgia while attending the Black Panther Conference at Georgia State University.

UA: "Why do you think it is so important to remember our founders and honor their memories?"

RT: "We should remember our founders because the history of the school is a history I think of sacrifice and struggle, because people risked their lives - literally risked their lives for this campus to stay open."

People gave their all until their dying day to keep the school open because they believed in the mission of the institution and they believed in the students of the institution. Many of the students who were taught at Florida Baptist Institute, for example, I'm in the process of trying to tracking who these students are, what they became - I find many of them becoming, principals, teachers at many other institutions, and that is so very, very important."

"Our history tells people, it distinguishes us, it tells us that when you walk in the Sarah Blocker Hall it's more than just a building; we have to know who Sarah Blocker is and why we should honor her. The Athalie Range Science Hall, for example, Athalie Range was inducted in the Florida Women's Hall of Fame in 1997. They are more than just names, these are people who gave, and gave, so that we could be here and we need to understand that, we need to respect their mission and we need to live up to their mission and we need to live up to their expectations."

DR. THEVENIN'S PERSONAL SIDE

UA: "What are your hobbies?"

RT: "I love to go boating and I love the beach, I love going sightseeing, I love museums! I'm always exploring museums and I love sailing because when you go on a boat ride it's so relaxing; you just sit there and enjoy the water."

UA: "Are you married with children? If so, what age children do you have?"

RT: "No, I'm not, eventually I hope to be, but right now when you first get out of graduate school and you are trying to translate all the work that you have done to a monograph or manuscript that takes a lot, and so I have to focus on my work and focus on basically engaging in the historical debate. That's where my head is right now."

UA: "How long have you been at Florida Memorial University?"

RT: "This will be my third year, but I taught here in 1993/94, a year after I graduated from the University of Miami. I decided to get my Ph.D."

UA: "How do you unwind after a long week?"

RT: "Um, do I? (Laughter) I go out to dinner with my sisters - I have three sisters. We're all very accomplished and so, the weekends, that's our special time. My sister is a lawyer, my other sister is a nurse and my youngest sister is at graduate school - she is doing her Masters in journalism, so its just the three of us are out here in Miami - my mom passed away and my dad lives in New York."



Having lunch at a Korean restaurant in New Orleans with younger sister Stella, right. Rose and Stella were enjoying each others company while visiting New Orleans to attend their sister Nancy's graduation from Tulane Law School.

UA: "What was the last book you read?"

RT: "The last book I read was *"Force Into Glory"*

UA: "Who are your favorite musical artistes?"

RT: "I'm a big hip hop fan, ok, *huge* hip hop fan from the old school to the new school. Yes, I like India Irie, I like Erica Badu, but I also like Snoop and 50 cent, and Lil Kim. Hip hop, R&B, I listen to all of that, I listen to reggae, soca, I'll listen to everything! I tell my students, "I listen to everything you listen to!" (laughing), including what's her name? Missy, Missy Misdemeanor Elliot, I listen to her too."

UA: "As a young woman, what other goals do you want to achieve?"

RT: "I would like to publish at least three or five books. One book on the Black Panthers, well, I'd like to publish a set of books on the Black Panther Party and then I would like to publish a second set of books on the history of Florida Memorial University because we have this great Institution and it's wonderful! I also want you to know who Sarah Blocker is and why she's so important, who Susie Holley is and why she's important, who's Athalie Range, why she's important, you know, that's the kind of research I'd like to do some day."

UA: "If you were given a choice for a vacation right now, would you choose to be high up in the mountains overlooking flower filled fields, or to be eating freshly cooked seafood at Sunset on a cliff overlooking the sea, or be touring Brazil's rainforest on foot with a guide and only a few amenities?"

RT: "Eating the seafood sounds great, I love seafood! I love, um, all kinds of seafood; as soon as you said, "Seafood," it wasn't even a choice!" (laughing).



CHARLIE CRIST
ATTORNEY GENERAL

October 21, 2003

Dr. Rose C. Thevenin
12740 SW 62 Terrace
Miami, FL 33183

Dear Dr. Thevenin:

Congratulations on your nominee, Sarah Ann Blocker, being selected to the 2003 Florida Women's Hall of Fame! That is absolutely fantastic news, and I want to add my best wishes to the accolades you have been receiving.

On behalf of the citizen's of Florida, I want to personally thank you for your interest and participation in recognizing the dedication and commitment of Sarah Ann Blocker in the ever changing roles of women.

My staff and I are eagerly looking forward to November 17, 2003, when it will be an honor and a privilege to induct Ms. Sarah Ann Blocker into the Florida Women's Hall of Fame.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Charlie Crist".

Charlie Crist

CC/jm

cc: Florida Commission of the Status of Women

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