

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Elmer Lucille Allen
Interviewer is Bob Gates
June 26th, 2017

() This symbol refers to an inaudible word or phrase.

. . . This symbol refers to an interruption to the speaker

Allen:

Lucille. Elmer Lucille Allen.

Gates:

Okay. Okay. This is Bob Gates and I'm interviewing Elmer Lucille Allen at her studio area.

Allen:

Mellwood Arts and Entertainment Center, in Louisville, KY

Gates:

Mellwood Arts and Entertainment Center. And it's the 26th?

Allen:

Today is June 26th.

Gates:

June 26th. How are you doing?

Allen:

Well, I'm doing fine today.

Gates:

Good. We've known each other for a while and it was nice to see you again.

Allen:

Yes, it is. I was really surprised. I said now who is Bob Gates? You know, you know people for years and don't know what their names are because you really never call them a name. Yeah. You speak, but you always speak.

Gates:

When I was at the arts council, we'd see each other in the hallway ...

Allen:

Oh yeah. Definitely.

Gates:

Well, it's nice to sit down with you. Where did you get your name Elmer?

Allen:

I was named for my father and also have a brother named Elmer. So there were three Elmers in the household.

Gates:
Really?

Allen:
Yes, I was the oldest sibling.

Gates:
Is that what your mom called you then?

Allen:
They called me Cil and they called my brother, Bud. And they called my daddy EJ.

Gates:
Were you the first?

Allen:
I was the oldest.

Gates:
So they called you Elmer just to make sure ...

Allen:
No, they called me Cil. L-U-C-I-L-E.

Gates:
But they gave you the name Elmer.

Allen:
Yeah. That was my given name. In fact, now I can only prove that I'm Elmer. I cannot prove that I'm Lucille at all because your driver's license don't contain your middle name. Yeah. So everything has Elmer. I would get a lot of envelopes with 'Mr.' on them and I would throw them away.

Gates:
Have you ever met another Elmer woman?

Allen:

No, I have not.

Gates:

You might be the first Elmer woman.

Allen:

Might be the first, but there are a lot of other women that have male names though. Yeah.

Gates:

Well, thanks for ... tell me about your youth.

Allen:

Well, I grew up, like I say, I was born in Louisville, Kentucky on August 23rd, 1931. And I lived at 18th and Chestnut, which is now known as the west end, but there was no distinction at that time as to what it was. And it was an all African-American neighborhood. And there was a grocery store and a drug store and they were Jewish stores. And I went to all African-American schools. I went to Western elementary school, went to Madison junior high school, then went to Central high school. And that was the only high school that African-Americans could go to back in those days was Central high school. There was another African-American school, but it was Catholic high.

Camera man:

(inaudible) You can pick it up. ... you mentioned the Catholic high school.

Allen:

The Catholic high school was at Eighth and Walnut at that time.

Gates:

What was the name of that high school?

Allen:

Catholic. Catholic high school.

Gates:

Oh, it was just called Catholic high school? It wasn't after a saint?

Allen:

At that time, African-Americans and whites, the neighborhoods were all segregated.

Gates:

Was there a name for your neighborhood?

Allen:

Now, they call it Russell neighborhood...If I was still living where I was born, I would be in Russell area. Yeah. But now, and at that time we didn't have a distinction at all or anything. No.

Gates:

So what did your dad do?

Allen:

My dad was a pullman porter. And at that time that was one of the better jobs, you know, but it was not a full-time job because when he was not doing that, he was a taxi-cab driver for the Empire taxi.

Gates:

He had three children?

Allen:

Yes, I have a sister, my brother and myself and my brothers was named Elmer Hammonds ... Elmer Johnson Hammonds, Jr. And my sister's named Mary Elizabeth Hammonds.

Gates:

Was she the youngest?

Allen:

She was the youngest.

Gates:

How far apart were they in age?

Allen:

My brother and I ... I'm August and my brother actually, we're about about 14 months apart. Because I'll be 86 in August and he'll be 85 in October. And my sister's deceased and she would be 84 if she'd had a birthday.

Gates:

So a couple of years after.

Allen:

Yeah. Yeah.

Gates:

And you all lived down ...

Allen:

1724 Chestnut. It was a three-story house and it was a rental house and at that time, people rented rooms, so we lived on the first floor and the other two floors, my mother rented out and, and those days we had coal stoves. You know, when you had coal delivered. So when the coal man would come, you'd drop the coal off at the street, then you'd have to take the wheelbarrow and take the coal down and put it in the cellar. And then when winter came, you had to go down on the cellar and bring a bucket full of coal up to heat the house.

Gates:

And she'd rent it out to other people upstairs?

Allen:

Yeah. She rented the rooms out and she was what you would call a day worker or a maid out in the white folks' neighborhood.

Gates:

Oh, she did.

Allen:

Yeah. That's what she did.

Gates:

So she worked all day and your dad worked at either of those two jobs ...

Allen:

Yeah.

Gates:

What was it like growing up there?

Allen:

Well, you know, you don't realize when you're growing up, people say that you're poor because everybody around you is poor. And as long as you eat and you have clothes on and you didn't have a lot of clothes and you didn't have electric stove, you didn't have electric irons. You know, you had flat irons and you'd heat an iron on the stove, and then you ironed your clothes. Even

though we had a bathroom in the house, it was on the second floor ... my mother had a bathroom on the second floor and on the third floor, but we lived so, but we took a bath in the tin tub because we were not allowed to go to the second and third floor because they were rented out.

Gates:

You took a bath in the tin tub?

Allen:

In the tin tub. Yeah.

Gates:

I remember doing that (inaudible).

Allen:

And you know, you had a coal stove in the kitchen and this is the way, you know, and like you say you cook, but you don't realize that other people are living different because everybody that lives in your neighborhood's living the same way.

Gates:

Does any of your art that you do reflect those days?

Allen:

No, my art does not reflect African-American history at all. No. Because I do Shibori dyeing and that's a Japanese technique. As I grew up the only art class I took was at Madison junior high. And I took it from a lady named Ms. Hattie Fig. And she lived she was an art teacher and my grandmother lived in the east end of town, off () street. And Ms. Hattie Fig lived up the street, but she was my art teacher. And that was the only art class that I had.

Gates:

In middle school?

Allen:

And it was not middle school. It's called junior high. At that time, it was 6, 6, 3, and three. There was no middle school. It was seven, eighth and ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Yeah. And so I had just had one course I did take a music class.

Gates:

Was it good?

Allen:

Well, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it.

Gates:

What did you learn?

Allen:

Just mainly we did watercolors and paint, you know? And that was all that I did. Yeah.

Gates:

Did you feel like you were an artist?

Allen:

No, I didn't feel like I was an artist. I was just feeling like I was doing what was required to do at that time. Now you have magnet schools, but there, you just had, you did routines, you had English, math, science, and then you had your electives. And my lectures, like, you know, like with their time we talked, we took sewing, you took cooking, you took typing and you took, and you took music, but that was all part of the day. Doing requirements. And I feel like at that time ...

Camera man:

Hold on. Ask your question again.

Gates:

You felt like it was like requirements to do art.

Allen:

In other words, I just took routine courses that were assigned, that were assigned to me. Yeah. And when and because you had no choice you otherwise, when you went to the seventh grade, you took certain subjects, other words, they were required subjects. Yeah. And there were only, at that time, there were only two black African-American junior high schools in the city of Louisville that was Jackson junior high and Madison Street junior high school. I went to Madison Street junior high, and it was located between 17th and 18th on Madison Street. Well, I lived at 18th and Chestnut, so I walked everywhere because my family never owned a car. And when you think about where I lived, I lived a block from where I went to school, where I went to junior high and I lived about three blocks from where I went to elementary school. And when you talk about, when I went to junior high school, when I went to senior high school, Central high school, I lived 10 blocks so I walked those also. That was pretty good. So every day you walked everywhere, you didn't know, because at that time they had street cars.

Gates:

The older you got, the farther you walked.

Allen:

That's right. Yeah. You walked, that's true.

Gates:

So you're growing up in a segregated community. Did you feel that?

Allen:

Well, you didn't know you were segregated as such, you know, in our particular neighborhoods, but when you went downtown to Fourth Street, you could not go into stores and try on clothes. Yeah.

Gates:

How did that make you feel?

Allen:

Well, we ended up ... Most of our clothes when I was a child were used clothes. We went to used clothing stores. So other than buying shoes, we never bought anything new.

Gates:

In the community?

Allen:

Yeah.

Gates:

And you belonged to a church then?

Allen:

I belonged to Plymouth Congregation Church right there at 17th and Chestnut, which was on the block from where I lived. And there was also a community center that was called Plymouth Settlement House, which was next door to Plymouth Congregational Church. And that's where I did all my crafts and stuff there. Mainly. You didn't, you didn't think about them as being art classes, but you did craft classes.

Gates:

You did that after school or something?

Allen:

After school. Uh huh. Plymouth Settlement House was something that was started years ago. I can send you information about it. It was started by a white community, but it was located between 16th and 17th next to the church.

Gates:

So you'd come home from school and walk over there?

Allen:

You just walked up the street there. Yeah. And at that time and also within that block, within the two block area you had the swimming pool, which was right there, it was at 17th and Magazine, which was a block south of Chestnut Street. And you had the high school, the junior high school, which was one block to the north of Chestnut Street.

Gates:

Did you have all these stores, black businesses there too?

Allen:

At that time, other than the beauty shops, I don't remember going to a black grocery store at all. They were Jewish stores.

Gates:

Had the Jewish community lived there before the blacks came in?

Allen:

Now that I don't know. This was in the 30's.

Gates:

Okay. That's what happened in Cincinnati is that Jewish communities were in the west end of Cincinnati. And then they went up the hills and the blacks came in from the south.

Allen:

The area that I was in was all African-American. Yeah. Yeah.

Gates:

So what about the funeral homes?

Allen:

Well, there were plenty funeral homes in those days, and there was one across the street that was at 17th and Chestnut between 16th and 17th on Chestnut, Mumford and Johnson Funeral Home. And they had two boys Howard and (). And so we played ... we would go play with the kids would play in the funeral home, and then with the funeral home and later on at 18th and

Chestnut, which was just four doors down from where I lived and, you know, was just... That was it.

Gates:

Where they owned by blacks?

Allen:

All blacks. Yeah. Because you were buried by black funeral homes. Yeah. Yeah. And then, but they're the only one black business that I remember is the Travis body shop and it was right next door to the funeral home. Okay. Yeah. And it was on 18th street ... it was between Magazine and Chestnut. In other words, you're talking about within a four block area that was more or less where I ... because we weren't allowed to walk anywhere hardly. So you were, it was very confined.

Gates:

I interviewed other African-Americans who talked about that period of ...

Camera man:

(inaudible).

Gates:

I'll stick my head out the window and tell them to go away. What was I saying? I forget. What I did I just ask you?

Allen:

I was what I was saying. Is that the name normally with...?

Gates:

Oh, I know. Go ahead...

Allen:

In other words, I more or less...

Camera man:

Hold on.

Allen:

That's the air conditioner. Yeah. I don't know. What I was saying is that I more or less lived within two blocks, either side, Northwest, north, and south, you know? So that was more or less your, your, everything that I attended to was within walking distance within a two block area.

Gates:

I was saying that I had interviewed African-Americans from that time period before. And they talk about the community as being a little bit more caring for the kids that people would watch over other people's kids...

Allen:

Well, actually, you think about that. And I still believe that if you live in a neighborhood that you are responsible for, not only for your own children, but for your neighbor's children. And this is what I found out when I was raising my children, is that everybody looked after everybody else's, you know? And it was responsibility, but nowadays is that people do not have respect for themselves or for other people I find out. Is that everybody's for themselves.

Gates:

You work a lot with a lot of community programs, don't you?

Allen:

Well, I do a lot. I still do a lot in the community. Yeah.

Gates:

We'll get into that a little later.

Allen:

Okay.

Gates:

How about black teachers?

Allen:

All your teachers were black. So you went to all black schools and, and when you sat down and think you gain your values from your teachers, how you look and how you dressed. And in those days, teachers dressed every day, they were stockings, they were high heel shoes. They wore suits, they were dressed and to compare, when I went to school and what you see today, there is no comparison. The teachers do not dress. You, children do not have an example of how to go to apply for a job because teachers, they are not being dressed. When they go to school. Now they wear slacks, they wear blue jeans, they wear tennis shoes. And those days you didn't, people didn't wear tennis shoes in those days.

Gates:

Well, I'm amazed when I go to church sometimes to see people underdressed.

Allen:

Yes. Yeah. But, but like I say, that that was what I grew up with, you know? Yeah. And even when I went on my first job, you couldn't even wear a pants. And so the whole period of time has changed. Is that music?

Camera man:

It creeps in. I mean, when she's talking, it's so far in the background, you can't really hear it, but steady presence there. Yeah. I think we'll be good. If it doesn't get any louder.

Gates:

Okay. So any memories you want to talk about growing up?

Allen:

Well, I just want to say that when growing up, I feel like the education that I got in the all black schools by all black teachers was exceptional because I came up where I had to take all science classes, all math classes. And at that time you had to take four years of language, foreign language. And those, what you call were ... in other words I took pre-college courses. And you didn't have a choice because if you thought you wanted to go to college, you took pre-college courses. So I went all the way, all the way through. At that time, they only taught up through geometry. Analytical geometry, but I took three years Latin and one year of French, you know, and this is in junior and this was in high school see, and nowadays I had a young lady to tell me, she said, I took Latin.

Allen:

I said, I took Latin in the ninth grade. And nowadays ... But now our schools are there. There are different, they're not teaching really. I think basic education. They're teaching. They're more or less focused on what you call magnet schools. And they're just, and they're just very narrow focused. But if you don't, but so if you're not majoring in these, when you come out of high school, you're really not prepared. And at that time in junior high school, you had what you call trade courses. You had carpentry, you had tailoring, you had printing, you had printing presses and in junior high school. And then you had, you had drafting, you had mechanics. And so you, you were exposed to what you call industrial arts at that time, plumbing, electricity auto mechanic. But nowadays you have to come out and either pay to have these courses, take these courses. Now, when they were part of the school system.

Gates:

You think that was more in the black community, they were training for those kinds of things or the white community had the same thing?

Allen:

Well, if you listen to people talk now industrial arts should be taught in the high school, but it was taken out. When my son, he took cooking and my son, this was in the seventies, he was taking cooking, but I don't know when they took the industrial arts out of the school system, but it was part of the school system.

Gates:

You took a lot of classes that helped you with your art later on?

Allen:

I didn't do any art classes at all.

Gates:

I mean, like taking these industrial art things that helped you.

Allen:

I did not. What I'm saying is that ... what I'm saying is at that time they called it the Smith Hughes course. And if you were not prepared to go into college, you took Smith Hughes courses, and you took so many hours of a trade plus so many hours of academic. Yeah. So that, that was called a Smith Hughes. But what I was stating is that industrial arts prepared people to come out and get a job when they, when they graduated from high school, which is what they're not able to do now.

Gates:

So you were taking what my school would have called college prep?

Allen:

That's what I took. Yeah.

Gates:

Why did you decide you wanted to go to college?

Allen:

Well, my parents only went to the eighth grade. And you looked up to your teachers and you knew that they had gone to college. And so you use them as examples, you know. And that's what I used as an example. So I wanted to go. Yeah.

Gates:

I read an interview that somebody did with you for Louisville paper, and they talked about all these different crafts and things that you learned when you were little. You were a girl scout?

Allen:

Well see, with the girl Scouts. I stayed with my grandmother in the East End. So my life was spent half the time with my mother sometimes. And then I'd go stay with my grandmother sometimes. And I was a girl scout and this was ... Hmm. I was 8, 9, 10 years old? Girl scout. And that's part of girl scouting, you know? And also at that time we sold girl scout cookies. I think that was the first year. And I have a photograph that was in the Courier Journal of me with a painting that I did. Because I sold the most girl scout cookies for my troop. And that was at

Presbyterian Community Center. At that time was, which was at Hancock and Rosaline. And the girl scout leader was Miss Nora Cordery.

Allen:

C O R D E R Y. Yeah.

Gates:

Was it all black?

Allen:

Everything was all black. You see, there was a black girl scout and a white girl scout. And I did not realize that until I was doing some paperwork. And I think the girls scout troop I was in was one of the first African-American girl scout troops. You know, so I didn't go, I really didn't go to school or anything with anybody white until I went to third year of college. So all my education was in the all black institutions.

Gates:

You became a chemist later on, right?

Allen:

Well see, after I graduated from Central High School in 1949, and at that time, University of Louisville had a black college for black students called Louisville Municipal College. So I went there for two years, went there in 1949 to 1951 and they closed in 1951. And if you would go back and talk about the Day Law. The Day Law was named for a man name Day, which stated that blacks and whites could not go to the same school. And so Louisville Municipal College was formed and it lasted from 1931 to 1951. And when they closed in 1951, I could not afford... Because University of Louisville at that time was a private school and that time, and I did not have enough money to go there. And I couldn't...

Gates:

So it was desegregated then?

Allen:

They desegregated in ... After the Day Laws went out of existence, that's when University of Louisville integrated that's when yeah... And Nazareth College, which is where I ended up going was the first day they accepted African-Americans in 1950 and their first graduates were in 1951.

Gates:

Where was that?

Allen:

Nazareth College is now Spaulding University and this right there at Fourth and Breckenridge where it has always been. Yeah. So that's where ... when I graduated from Spaulding, but that was Nazareth at that time in 19...

Gates:

() U of L, the black ()

Allen:

I went two years at Louisville Municipal College. And that was from '49 to '51.

Gates:

Did those follow you over to Spaulding?

Allen:

Well, that at that time, all the courses at Louisville Municipal College were mainly all like survey courses, like introduction to American culture, natural history, introduction to social sciences and other words, I was primary ... And then when I went to a Nazareth College, which was the first time I'd ever been to school with a white person, and it was at that time, Nazareth was an all-girls Catholic school at that time. And I ended up majoring in math and chemistry because I got an undergraduate degree with a major in chemistry and a minor in mathematics. And when you were at Catholic schools, I took 12 hours of religion and 12 hours of philosophy. And I took introduction to speech in English and psychology courses. But I did not take any art classes at all.

Gates:

What did you think of the religion classes?

Allen:

Well, I enjoyed them. And I think that, that it really gave me a different insight to things and it get, you know, like ethics, like philosophy, all of those things that people don't even take anymore.

Gates:

I liked Philosophy. It changed my life, kind of.

Allen:

Yeah. That's what I'm saying. And so it made you think so, but there are so many things that I felt like that I took back ... these are in the '40s and '50s that children aren't even exposed to anymore.

Gates:

Back then, did you ever think you'd be an artist at all?

Allen:

No, I did not think anything about that at all. I didn't really get involved in, although I've done...Like I sewed.. I learned how to teach art, learn how to sew, but you didn't think about that as an art form, which is what textiles is. It's nothing but art.

Gates:

Who taught you how to sew?

Allen:

Oh, my grandmother. Yeah. She taught me how to sew and I had an auntie ... at that time African-Americans were hired out into the white families to make all their clothes and drapers and stuff. So I had an auntie that's all she did for a living was she was a seamstress. So, yeah.

Gates:

What kind of pieces did you sew back then?

Allen:

Oh, I just made clothes to wear. Yeah, just clothes to wear, yeah.

Gates:

With patterns or?

Allen:

With patterns. Yeah.

Gates:

Did your grandmother make quilts?

Allen:

No. She never made quilts. No, but everything that we made, she made out of what you call cotton flour sacks, you know? Because you know, you didn't buy material. You just took flour sacks and made dresses.

Gates:

What did she make?

Allen:

Mainly dresses, skirts, and tops.

Gates:

Do you have any pictures of that stuff?

Allen:

I don't have any pictures of that.

Gates:

But they were pretty nice, huh?

Allen:

Well, yes they were. You know, because like I said, we didn't, we didn't go to the store. I didn't go to store to buy clothes.

Gates:

Yeah. So you're learning the skills,

Allen:

Yeah ... with my shibori stitching, it's all hand stitching. All the designs that I make are made by the (). I draw them out on paper. They're all graphic designs. I draw them out on paper. Then I stitch them by hand.

Gates:

Did you think your Grandmother was an artist in any way?

Allen:

Well, you don't really think about things back in those days. It's who you are, you know.

Gates:

You know, I'm being a folklorist. When I look at art, I have a big wide view. I think cooking can be art. I think sewing can be art. If you're creating ...

Allen:

Yeah. You know, it's, it's like cooking. It's like my grandmother, she raised chickens because you think about going to the store, we didn't think about going to the store, buying a chicken back in those days, you either went out in the backyard and killed the chicken, or you went to the poultry house and bought a chicken that was up and it was walking around and they killed it for you.

Gates:

Oh really? You'd pick out the chicken?

Allen:

You picked out your chicken and they would go kill it for you. Yeah. And then in the summertime, my grandmother, she would go buy chickens. And so she had what you call a chicken coop. And so she raised, she would go in the spring, she'd maybe buy 50 to a hundred chickens. And then she would have she and she raised ... at that time she raised turkeys for Christmas and Thanksgiving. And you couldn't put them on the ground. So she had them in the garage.

Gates:

You couldn't raise them on the ground?

Allen:

No, she didn't put them on the ground. No.

Gates:

How come?

Allen:

I don't know why. That's what she did. And she had them up, raised them up and had them up in the garage. But up off the ground.

Gates:

Did she raise turkeys for people in the neighborhood?

Allen:

Just for us. She raised about three. We had them for Christmas. Thanksgiving. Yeah. Nothing was sold. It was just for the family.

Gates:

Sounds pretty good. Did it taste good?

Allen:

Oh Yeah. Uh huh. Yeah.

Gates:

So you kind of respected your grandmother's work. Cooking and sewing and stuff like that?

Allen:

Well, yeah, I learned how to cook and learned how to make lemon pies and meringues where you beat the meringue with a fork, you know, stuff like that.

Gates:

Okay. We're on right now. Okay. Yeah. Well, we were just talking about some of the interviews you've done other places.

Allen:

Yeah. But Kertis Creative and the Brown family is doing a history of the Brown family. And they're also interviewing employees that worked there. And I was the first African-American chemist hired at Brown-Forman in 1966. And so they'd been interviewing me and they did, they did an interview over there. And then I, they did a walkthrough and we went back to Brown Forman last week. And we walked through the areas where I had worked. And it's so funny when you go into places that have been, that you went, where you started working in 66 and this has been totally renovated. And at that time, the when you walked into where I worked, the lab was in where the, what you call the production building. And when you came into the production building, there was a desk and a Miss Elizabeth sat right there at this desk when you walked in and there was a hallway and this hallway had offices on either side.

Allen:

And the lab was in the back of the building. Well, this has all been renovated now. So all this has gone. But when I was there, when I went to work every day, I passed the president and the vice president of the company, George Garvin Brown and William Lyons Brown sat on the left side of the hallway and their secretary sat on the right side. So you pass these offices every day, going back to the lab. Well, the lab is no longer there. It's been renovated has been moved twice while I was there. And it's now office space. And it's like going someplace surreal because it's totally different than what it was. And you just can't realize. And if you hadn't, if I had not worked there, I would have not have known that if there ever been a laboratory there and what I sat down and what I told the interviewer is that I had an opportunity to every day to speak to my big boss, which nowadays the big boss is in another building. And a lot of people don't even know who the big boss is.

Gates:

Did you talk to them every day?

Allen:

You spoke to them every day and they, and Mr. Lyons Brown had dogs there, what do you call them? Saint Charles spaniels or something like that. And they had, he had this fellow that worked with him and they would bring the dogs to work. And so, you know, you would see this and, and, it was like a family and you just, and you didn't think of them as a boss, but you just pass by and just spoke. Yeah.

Gates:

So you went to college and got your degree...

Allen:

I got my degree in 1953, but I could not get a job in Louisville at that time because they were not hiring blacks at that time and anywhere for a chemist. So my first job, I had in Indianapolis, I worked as a clerk typist. That was my very first job there. And then from there I worked...

Gates:

Where did you work?

Allen:

At Fort Benjamin Harrison as a clerk on an army base. I was there. I worked there.

Gates:

As a civilian.

Allen:

A civilian. And then from there I worked at three hospitals. I went into med tech. I really wanted to be a med tech when I was going to college. But that would have been a five-year course. And I wanted to finish in four years. And so I just got my degree in chemistry, but I did lab tech work at General hospital there. And at Methodist and at a community hospital there.

Gates:

You feel like you were doing what you wanted then?

Allen:

Well, I was doing lab work, which is what I really liked doing. Yeah.

Gates:

They'd bring the blood or something like that ...

Allen:

We would go out and get the samples and, in fact, you got to meet the people because you would go out and get the samples and you would come back and analyze the work. Yeah.

Gates:

Why didn't they hire black people to do that then?

Allen:

Well, I was probably one or two in that lab, you know? Most labs, if you're one or two in a lab you're doing good, even at that period of time in Indianapolis.

Gates:

Yeah. That was Indianapolis. All those jobs are in Indiana. So you left your family to go to Indianapolis. Well, how did you know there were jobs up there?

Allen:

I applied for a job for, the civil service. That's why I went there and I had an auntie lived there. I stayed with her. Yeah.

Gates:

When I told you I was doing research with blacks and Cincinnati and they told me that Louisville, Cincinnati, Indianapolis was kind of like a circuit of black communities that talked to each other. Was that true?

Allen:

Well, see, that I do not know.

Gates:

Okay. But you had family there.

Allen:

I had family there. So, in other words, when you ... when I worked at () so that was commute every day. So, it was not directly Indianapolis, it was outside Indianapolis.

Gates:

Well, they used the term - And I don't know if I should say it...They called it Nappy Town?

Allen:

They called it Nap Town.

Gates:

Nap Town. Natti for Cincinnati and Nappy for Indianapolis. What was Louisville?

Allen:

I don't know.

Gates:

Okay. So you were working up there by yourself or you're married or?

Allen:

I do not discuss my family life at all.

Gates:

Okay. That's fine. Yeah. But you were up there.

Allen:

Yeah. Yeah.

Gates:

I guess what I was getting at: Were you pulled away from your family back towards Louisville?

Allen:

Yeah. Uh huh.

Gates:

... Did you feel like you wanted to go back to Louisville?

Allen:

Well, I came back to Louisville and worked at a children's hospital here. I worked at children's hospital. And then from there I went to American Synthetic, where I was a research chemist from there. And then from there, I went to medical dental research before I went to Brown-Forman.

Gates:

Wow, that's a lot of jobs.

Allen:

Yeah.

Gates:

Why were you moving around so much?

Allen:

In other words, as you get promoted, you want to you know ... And then I left children's hospital. Then I went to American Synthetic and American Synthetic, they closed, they downsized, they were downsizing back in the sixties also. They closed the lab and then I went to medical, dental research. And then there was a lady there ...

Camera man:

[Inaudible].

Allen:

We were talking about medical, dental research.

Camera man:

[Inaudible]

Gates:

Okay. You're working these different jobs, you're a chemist, and you're getting higher ... getting more money, right? And did you look for Brown-Forman or did they look for you?

Allen:

I went to Brown-Forman ... When was working in medical dental research I worked for Dr. Bronner, I was a research chemist and there was a young lady there whose uncle was over the lab in Brown-Forman. And she asked me, told me to put in an application. And that's when I applied there and I was hired there. In 1966.

Gates:

Had you drunk bourbon before? Did you like bourbon?

Allen:

Never did drink. Don't drink today. Never did that. I never drank, no.

Gates:

I work at Buffalo Trace and there's people on the line that have never drink it.

Allen:

That's right. That's right.

Gates:

So, what did you think about going to a bourbon place?

Allen:

You really didn't think about bourbon as bourbon as you think about it today because bourbon is a big name now, but at that time it was a job. It was a job. And I enjoyed it. I worked in the lab with, with four ladies. The lab had four ladies I think was about six or eight men, but there were three ladies, all the area I worked in, there was three ladies in that area. And the other lady worked in sensory, which is sensory lab. Yeah.

Camera man:

[inaudible]

Gates:

(inaudible)

Allen:

Okay. Okay.

Gates:

So you got a job there, was it pretty welcoming?

Allen:

It was welcoming, you know, but, like I say, I was the only one. I had no one in the lab at all. I was, I was the only African-American there at the company that day. Anyway, there was about 10 or 12 in the lab, but that was, I was the only African-American and black. Yeah.

Gates:

So in a lab at a whiskey or bourbon place, it's also about tasting, too, isn't it?

Allen:

Well, it's about tasting, but it's also about analytical, you know all your distilleries have governmental ... because your bourbon has to be within a certain proof. So it has to be, it has to meet guidelines. So what kind of things? Well, I analyze raw materials, corn, rye and malt, you know, bourbon has to be at least 51% corn. And so you have to analyze all the raw materials and the train cars could not be unloaded until the grain had been approved and then they would be unloaded.

Gates:

Are you looking for dryness and moistness?

Allen:

You're looking for moisture, you're looking for starch content. Yeah. And moisture, yeah.

Gates:

You would do that before the train come in?

Allen:

The train would be sitting there and they couldn't unload it until after it had been approved.

Gates:

They still do that a Buffalo Trace. For the trucks. They put a probe in.

Allen:

That's right. That's it.

Gates:

You did that kind of stuff. What else did you do?

Allen:

I did that. Also, we gave tours. And as you know, yeast is one of those things that is always a private thing, you know, what makes the bourbon, what it is. Particular product and what it is. And we did that.

Gates:

What do you mean you gave tours? You were actually a tour guide?

Allen:

We were actually ... the lab gave tour guides. We were the lab, but we also gave the tours.

Gates:

Oh, how often did you give the tours?

Allen:

Well, just depending on who came, you know, there wasn't a certain ... and eventually they did have tour guides. But at that time, you know, we just gave individual tours.

Gates:

Did you just take them around the whole place?

Allen:

Oh, we took them mainly to how the bourbon is made, you know, how the ferment, you know, where the mash and the distillate tank and where the barrels go down and where you empty the whiskey out.

Gates:

So now you're being recognized. I know in a play, not a play, but in that video, what they're working on with bourbon as the first African-American chemist, right?

Allen:

Yeah. Uh huh.

Gates:

I mean, that's pretty unusual.

Allen:

Well, you know, sometimes you go through things and you don't realize, you know, life is, it's funny. It's like, no one teaches you how to have a baby. So you go into a place and you, and you have to fit yourself into this job. You have to learn how to take and to give. And so I come in and I speak and we all are working together and we learn and you become a family.

Camera man:

[Inaudible]

Allen:

Okay. Where are we going now?

Allen:

Talking about the lab. Working in the lab as a family. Oh. And then as you go into the lab, you know as I said in that statement at the Kentucky Historical Society, when I went into the lab, everything was what you call wet chemistry. They didn't have computers. And then when they got computers, then you had to be taught how to use computers, how to use these computerized instrumentation. So you went to these companies to learn how to do all these instrumentation. And then eventually all reports were handwritten, eventually they brought in computers. You learned how to do reports that were, that you had to do your own reports. You know? So I do Microsoft Office. I did (). Then it went to Lotus and then they went to Microsoft Office with Excel, access, PowerPoint on that. And I still do it on an everyday basis.

Gates:

When you say it's wet versus dry, what does that mean?

Allen:

Not wet versus dry ... Wet chemistry is where you pipette everything. And then when you go to the instrumentation, you do the same test, but the instrument picks up the sample and analyzes it. So you have wet chemistry and then you have what you call automation. If you go through the lab at Buffalo Trace, you'll see everything is done by instruments now.

Gates:

Yeah. They don't take pipettes ...

Allen:

Pipettes ... And you didn't realize that you'd pipette sulfuric acid or something like that and you didn't think anything about that. Sodium Hydroxide, you know, and OSHA was not even in existence when we had the lab.

Gates:

So it was dangerous?

Allen:

Well, all chemicals are dangerous. You know? But you take precaution.

Gates:

Did you enjoy that work?

Allen:

Yeah, I did it 31 years. I retired in '97.

Gates:

I saw you were a part of the Bourbon and Babes ...

Allen:

In that play? Yeah.

Gates:

You're one of the people they ...

Allen:

They portrayed me. Yeah.

Gates:

Did they interview you about that?

Allen:

The lady interviewed me. In fact, her husband works at Brown-Forman.

Gates:

So what was your part?

Allen:

They portrayed me in the play. Just me in the lab. That's all. That's all they did. Yeah. Yeah.

Gates:

Cool. So while you're doing that, you're with your family, you're here in Louisville, you move up to different departments or?

Allen:

As the lab grew, they outgrew one lab, and then they built ... In fact, that this was the third lab that they moved to. So I could say, as they grew, I grew.

Gates:

Okay. That's 30 years of your life? What else were you doing?

Allen:

Well, while I was doing that, I was also working in the community. I had a little league team. I did artwork ...

Gates:

Little league baseball?

Allen:

Yeah, I formed a little league baseball back in the sixties because I had two boys and they could not play in the white league because on the other side of the Shawnee Park, on the other side of Broadway. So I did that.

Gates:

How'd you do that? Form the team?

Allen:

You wrote and establish it. And I was the president and I had six teams and I raised money for uniforms and got the baseball field.

Gates:

Were you a coach too?

Allen:

I wasn't a coach. I wasn't a coach. Yeah. But just, I just ran it. Yeah. But I had it for six years.

Gates:

But you did that so your boys could play baseball?

Allen:

Yeah. Six years. And, you know, it's like a lot of things, if you're not in charge, no one's does what you do. And a lot of things folded because you put all your, you put all your energies into that, but a lot of people do not want to put a lot of energy into stuff and their own time. And it's a commitment when you run any organization, it's commitment that you have to do.

Gates:

But you're doing that. You got a baseball league going. You're taking part in church.

Allen:

Yeah. And then in the eighties, I got involved in the arts in the eighties...

Gates:

Before that were there any feelings about art that you wanted to do?

Allen:

Other than sewing. I would take individual classes maybe at the school, you know, but I liked sewing always. Always sewed. I took woodwork and I've done jewelry making and know just art, you know, and the things that I enjoy doing.

Gates:

I know Ed White. Did you work with him with any?

Allen:

Oh, I worked with he and Zambia. No. More or less as a, just as a person, you know, personal level. But not actually working with him.

Gates:

So how'd you get into art?

Allen:

Well, I've gotten into the arts in the eighties when I took my first ceramic class in in the eighties. I took it from Seneca High School, from an art therapist. I got into clay and I had arthritis and she said you know, it will help your hands and stuff like that. I took that class. And then I took what you call mold ceramics, where, you know, you go in and you buy a Christmas tree and you decorate it and you paint it and you fire it. And I did that. And then from there, I went to I decided to go to Metro Arts Center, which is part of Metro Parks and Recreation. And then there, the teacher, there was a student at U of L working on a master's and then from there I, they wanted to know why didn't I go on to U of L and take classes.

Allen:

And that's when I started taking classes. And you probably know Melvin Rowe well, anyway, he, he taught there and, you know, Laura Ross. Well see, well then they were the ones that encouraged me to go to U of L. So I took my first class in U of L in 1981.

Gates:

You had them for teachers before?

Allen:

No, I had them at Metro Arts Center. Metro Arts Center was part of Parks and Recreation, but they were students at U of L. They were graduate students at U of L.

Gates:

They were teaching there?

Allen:

They were teaching part-time, you know, that's community. Anyway, you take, you go and you take a two-hour class. That's what, you know, art class, community art class.

Gates:

Kind of like what I was doing in Cincinnati ().

Allen:

In other words, you have, they meet once a week, you know, two hours. And that's also... Melvin at that time was married to another lady and she taught weaving to learn how to weave out there. So, yeah.

Gates:

Why did you do all that?

Allen:

I just enjoyed being with people. Yeah. And that's the reason why I'm involved in stuff now.

Gates:

Do you like the art too, part of it? Making stuff?

Allen:

I like making stuff. And also like the idea of being involved in what happens in the arts.

Gates:

Okay. So those two teachers, they thought you were pretty good.

Allen:

Well, they just still felt like I was really interested and wanted to pursue it, that I needed to go to college courses...

Gates:

So you had the money now to go?

Allen:

Well, yeah. I just paid one fee, you know? So whatever the classes were.

Gates:

I mean, was that a big deal, going to U of L when you couldn't go before?

Allen:

Well, it was really strange to go back to school and that's what I say. I got my second degree from University of Louisville, but I couldn't get my first degree from there. Because I got a master's from there in 2002 in ceramics.

Camera man:

Do we get that again? Okay. That line about you got your second degree from there, but you didn't get your first?

Allen:

Yeah. It's amazing that I came back to U of L in the 1880s and got a master's in 2002. In fact, I could not, when I came out of high school, I could not go to the University of Louisville

Gates:

Because it was segregated when you got out of high school.

Allen:

Yeah. I couldn't afford, I couldn't afford to go. Yeah.

Camera man:

You said 1880s.

Allen:

Yeah. I came back in 1980. (Laughing) I would be kind of old, wouldn't I? Yeah, 1980s. Yeah. I came back in the eighties and you know, it is amazing to well, you know, it's, it's just amazing at schools, how they have changed, you know, like I said, when I went to Spaulding, it was all girls school, run by nuns, you know? And then now it's an integrated co-ed school.

Gates:

What was U of L like when you're getting a master's? How old were you when you were there?

Allen:

Well, I'm 83 now. So I was saying, you know, whatever, whatever it was in my fifties, something like that...

Gates:

And were you already retired?

Allen:

I just retired in '97. But I went to school. But anyway, I took, when I was working on my masters, that's when I was introduced to fiber. So when I got my masters, my thesis is on fiber and in clay. So that's when I did my Shibori working on my wall hangings and I did stenciling. So that was what my show is all about.

Gates:

So did your art kind of evolve in a certain way?

Allen:

Well, like I say, I did all hand stitching all my Shibori workers, all hand-stitched work.

Gates:

What is Shibori work?

Allen:

Shibori work is what you see hanging on the wall. That's Shibori, it's a Japanese technique and it can be what you call pole wrapped, where you wrap a pole and you push it down and you dye that, or you can stitch it, which is what I call stitch resist. Or you can fold and wrap. You can fold and fold it and block it and dye that and get your design that way. Or there's many techniques for that.

Gates:

Is it related to batik at all?

Allen:

No, it's not... Now batik is totally different. Yeah. Batik and shibori are totally different techniques altogether. Yeah.

Gates:

So you're putting your block and blocking what?

Allen:

In other words, when you do stitch resist, you stitch your design. In other words, I do all my designs on paper. And so I might do an eight-foot wall hanging, but it starts out on an eight and a half by 11 piece of paper. And I designed it. And then, so then it's all stitched. And then after

you stitch it, you pull up the stitches up, what you call gathering, and then when you tie it and when you dyed it resists wherever it's pulled together, tight, it's called resist. So the dye cannot get to that part. So that's why you see some of its white and some of it's blue. Though the white has been resistant. That's what you call stitch resist, But I do mainly all geometric designs.

Gates:

Has anybody ever videotaped you doing any of this?

Allen:

Yeah, they did, I worked with a young girl that was in dream factory and I taught her how to do a small piece and the fellow with the Courier Journal, for (), he videoed me teaching her how to do that.

Gates:

So that Japanese style, where did you learn that from?

Allen:

Oh, I learned that technique while I was working on my masters. Yeah. But my master's thesis was on stenciling. That was a stencil process. But then I started doing Shibori.

Gates:

What about ()?

Allen:

I still do. I still take classes. I take classes every week. I go to U of L, even in the summertime, I go at least once or twice a week.

Gates:

Don't you know more than the teachers?

Allen:

Well, that's not the point. No, you'll never know more than the teacher, because there are techniques that you never learned. In fact, the first professor that I had was Tom Marsh and it was all reduction firing (). There was no electric firing. No, you didn't fire. You didn't do glaze firing in an electric kiln. There are so many things and each professor teaches something different, but I do what you call direct studies and you can do the things that you enjoy doing. Yeah. So if you've got a project that you want to do and you need assistance, in other words, you do the project and he's just there to help you if you want help.

Gates:

I guess I'm wondering, are there like apprenticeships, that you'd take sometimes where you're working one-on-one with an artist and he teaches, or she teaches something?

Allen:

No I've never done that.

Gates:

Even with the Japanese technique, you were just learning.

Allen:

I learned it in a classroom and then I have books and you read. Yeah. But I never did one on one. Then you attend workshops. I've attended workshops. I've attended national ceramic conferences and stuff like that.

Gates:

So were you doing ceramics while you were doing the textiles?

Allen:

Yeah. Well, in fact, I was introduced to textiles while I was in ceramics because I had to take another course. I had to take another art class before I could get my masters. So I took two art classes.

Gates:

Who influenced your style the most, I guess, of your teachers? Is there anybody who really influenced your work the most?

Allen:

Well, I think ... I don't know if they actually influenced you, but you learned things from them like Tom and Jenny Marsh ... they were my first U of L teachers.

Camera man:

[Inaudible]

Gates:

Okay. We're back in. Did you kind of see a progression of your art changing over the years?

Allen:

Oh yeah. You change, because I've made teapots. I've made, now making platters, decorating, platters, doing, doing a technique that, when I went in the eighties, I could never have done because the facilities did not do it at that facility, but it's still the University of Louisville, but the teacher did not teach that method.

Gates:

What was the technique?

Allen:

It was electric firing and reduction firing is gas firing. When you do gas firing, you do gas, wood, you do salt you do (). I've done every technique that you can do and raku. And then when you do electric firing, everything is done in an electric kiln and what you call oxidation firing. So it's all done by electric.

Gates:

It's two different techniques and two different results.

Allen:

Yeah. Then you get totally different results. Yeah. In other words, you got what you call low fire. And even in the electric firing, you got low fire, mid-range, and you got high fire. Like your porcelain is what you call high fire, cone 9, 10, and 11 mid ranges from five to eight. And then you have low fire. You talk about less than cone 05 and less than cone 06.

Gates:

And the cone is ... the cone that burns...

Allen:

In other words, now you have a cone, but now everything's electronic. It's all electronic. So you really don't have to put cones, you know, per se...

Gates:

But you know exactly...

Allen:

In other words, you program the kiln to ... Yeah.

Gates:

Do you still do both types?

Allen:

I do. I do. Mainly all, all electric now because of a reduction firing with the kilns are so big and you need to be there to help... It's more like a community. It takes two or three people to fill a big kiln. Electric fire you can do on your own. Oh yeah, because the kiln is only like this far. When you talk about a wood-burning kiln, it might be great big.

Gates:

Were teapots the first thing you were doing?

Allen:

First pots you learn how to throw. You do pinch pots which is what you teach children in school, pinch pots, and then you do coil pots. Then you do slab work and then you do throwing. In other words, it's a progression. You don't start off making teapots, but I've made plenty of teapots.

Gates:

You've been pretty happy with...

Allen:

Well, I enjoy teapots. I like teapots as an aesthetic beauty, not as a functional work, you know, other words, functional pot is what you can use. I like to look at them, but I don't care about for them being functional at all.

Gates:

Can people use your teapots?

Allen:

No, they're not functional.

Gates:

What makes them not functional?

In other words, a functional teapot is where you can put water in it and you can actually pour. Yeah. In other words, you can make a teapot that doesn't, that has all the parts to it, but it doesn't actually pour. It has to have a body has to have a lid. It has to have a spout, but it doesn't... I have a little teapot over there, but it does not function. That's a teapot.

Gates:

What if somebody bought one, and they think it's a functional one and it's not?

Allen:

You tell them it's for the aesthetic beauty because a lady just asked me for one, where could you buy one of my teapots? I said, they're not functional, but they're for aesthetic beauty.

Gates:

I got a feeling I tried to do that once with somebody's pot. (laughs)

Allen:

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I collect teapots and you never use them. I might have about 30 or 40 teapots in my house. But, they're for beauty, because you like them. It's for your collection. Yeah.

Gates:

Why do you like teapots?

Allen:

One thing is it's one of the hardest things to make because there's so many parts to it. You know, you gotta make the body, you gotta make the spouts. You got to make the lid, you got to make the base, you gotta make the handle. And you wants to see how it looks when it gets done. In other words, it's your taste. And like I said, I don't do commissions. I do things that I like to make. Because in other words, if you're doing a commission, you doing what somebody else wants you to make. In other words, you're making it for them. It's nothing you want make.

Gates:

Did you try commission before?

Allen:

No, but, but the antique mall makes money all the time. Go downstairs. Yeah. It's full. See all those cars they're down in the antique mall.

Gates:

Yeah. Antique malls are fun. I bought my wife at an antique thing, these Corning Ware glass. The ones that nest and are different colors.

Allen:

Yeah.

Gates:

Cause it reminds me of the fifties.

END OF INTERVIEW