

Interviewee: Tina E. Gaffney  
Interviewer: Selina Gallo Cruz & Milagros Montenegro  
Date of Interview: May 22, 2018  
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts  
Transcriber: Milagros Montenegro



Abstract: Tina E. Gaffney, originally from San Antonio, Texas, is an established actress, activist, and educator. In this interview, Ms. Gaffney details her vibrant history in the world of social change. Similarly, Ms. Gaffney explores her admiration for the world of theater and its ability to change audiences' perspectives. This interview also discusses Ms. Gaffney's views on issues such as racism, sexism, and socio-economic disparities and the forms they impact the educational system. Ms. Gaffney believes "meat on the bones" theater and social activism have the capacity to establish real change. Although not discussed in the interview, to express her joy, vibrancy, and constant optimism Ms. Gaffney on a daily basis dresses in all-orange ensembles. Overall, Ms. Gaffney's interview encapsulates her life mission, "To be enriched by [the] people I interact with and hopefully to interact with them as well and continually make people's lives better."

MM: Ready? Alright I'm just going to follow the guide and see where it goes.

TG: Okay.

MM: What is your full name, maiden name, and married name is applicable?

TG: Alright, my full name is Tina Evez Gaffney, I never tell people my middle name so that's a good thing and what was your next part?

MM: Married name if applicable?

TG: [laughs] not applicable, not married.

MM: Where were you born? Oh, when were you born is actually the question.

TG: I was born in San Diego, California in 1963.

MM: Let's see have you ever been married?

TG: No.

MM: Do you have any children?

TG: No.

MM: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

TG: Ahh, that's a good thing because I'm just doing the new thing, oh what is it, the ancestry DNA thing.

MM: Oh really?

TG: And in no particular order, obviously African American, my last name is as Irish as you can possibly get, so I know that's in me. It drives people crazy because if you want me as the bright, passionate women that I am, it comes with the package, that's how that goes. There is actually some Hawaiian in me, don't know where that came from, some German, some little tiny bit of Chekov Slovakian, what was the fourth one? I am not like Louis Gates that has all the resources at his disposal, but let me see what else, there is a little bit of Hispanic in me and there is a little bit of Native in me, so I am just starting this journey. So, there is a lot [laughs] a lot, there is just a lot, I am finding though that I am really getting intrigued by the Native culture and music and literature and things, so I don't know why but I am finding myself drawn to that.

MM: I have always wanted to do that, find out more about my background. Would you mind telling me a little more about your parents?

TG: Oh okay, well one of my parents was in the military, my other parent was very into social work and helping out people and I tell people that helping people is in my DNA. I just told somebody that the other day. If I am not helping people I am figuring out a way to help people. If people tell me they need help I am helping them find resources. That has been in my social justice work, my theater work, kind of a running theme in my life. I mean my grandma has a saying, "If you are not sleeping you are working, if you are not working you are sleeping," that's pretty much me, first one in, last one to leave. I am always working on something to enrich people's lives and make the quality of their lives better which kind of leads me to my social justice/mission statement which is, "To be enriched by other people I interact with and hopefully to interact with them as well and continually make people's lives better." I mean I will never forget, I was doing, in Texas I was doing a touring show, called Aesop's Fallibles, which is a comedic take off of Aesop's Fables and after the show a little girl came and she tugged on my shoulder and said, "Ms. Gaffney, Ms. Gaffney" and I was like, "Mmh," she said, "I want to do what you do when I get big cause you make the life better." And I went, "*Make life better*" and that stuck with me because a kid that is that little can be that affected by what I am doing and when I talk to actors and train them I say, "You have the ability to change the fabric of people's lives with your talent and that is something that should be respected and taken very seriously and that's how I came upon my life mission, "To be enriched my others in interactions with them and to make the qualities of their lives better and then hopefully have my life enriched in return with the way they interact with me."

MM: This is not part of the guide, but it just came to me, as you were answering the question, do you think it is important to have that kind of mission for yourself?

TG: Oh gosh yes because, because another thing that is so important to me and I when I taught other people, especially young women, it is so important to have achievable artistic goals, if it is

in social justice work, in social goal, if it is in theater, theater goals because people that come after you need to see someone, particularly someone that looks like them, in a decision making position, making positive decisions and having things go in a positive direction. Well they can say, “This person did it, if Milagros did it, or if Ms. Gaffney did it, imagine what I can do.” I am a possibilities person and that is what keeps me going, I mean Dr. [Martin Luther] King even said, “You must keep moving forward.” So that is my goal in my social justice work and in my theater work “To keep moving forward.”

MM: That’s amazing. Next question is where have you lived during your life? Can you talk a little about that?

TG: Oh god, let’s see, well I lived in San Diego, California where I was born, I’ve lived in New York state, I’ve lived in San Antonio, Texas, and I’ve lived here in Worcester. Massachusetts.

MM: What were your neighborhoods growing up?

TG: That’s a great, great, great question! When I was growing up it was vastly different then the way it is now. One of the reasons I loved living in San Antonio so much was because when you move in to the new neighborhood, as corny as it may sound to some generations these days—are you a millennial before I say this?

MM: Kind of, a little bit, yeah.

TG: Okay [laughs] but some people that are not in my generation can’t relate to this, but I’ll say it anyways cause I know there will be people that do. When people moved to your neighborhood people would knock on your door and they would like bring you food, and they would say, “Welcome!” And they would have a welcoming committee and tell you things you need to know like the bank, and the grocery store, and the post office. You would be welcome and when people moved in they would throw you a block party or a roof top garden party and people would play music and connect with each other! Emotionally people, personally connect with each other and it’s so important! Try and do that now and people would look at you like you have nine heads! “But what if something happens? But what if there is an altercation? But what if, what if?” And I am like “forget about the what if.” That people connection is so important! And I loved San Antonio because you’d have Slavic people running soul food restaurants, and African American people running German restaurants, and Greek people running Spanish restaurants, it was a true indication in how I feel the world should be. Cause our world is not just all one thing, it’s a lot of *everything*, and that is resonated with me so much because I know being born in the sixties as I was that is a direct, direct connection, to why I am as passionate as I am as a woman in all the works I ever do because of the times I was born in. There was a lot going on in the sixties, as you know, I mean you know, it is so important to keep those connections going so I would just say that it was a true reflection of the way I think the world should be, a lot of everything, working together, learning from each other and doing those things, so that is kind of—I mean I have to tell you [laughs] my god, my grandfather was quite a character, wearing this little apple cap, it was off to the side. Now on Sunday afternoon there

was always be the big Sunday dinner, the women would be in one part and the men in the other. The women would be out on the porch playing a game called Bidwizz, ever heard of it?

SGC: Oh no.

TG: Okay, well Bidwizz would be when these women would sit in their Sunday best, with their church hats on, they'd talk, the idea is you have to get the card on the table, whoever gets the card down the fastest gets a certain amount of points. On the other side, the men are sitting there smoking their cigars but the whole point of both of these is that both groups love to gossip, they just do it different. So, the women would be right in your face and they would see someone walking down the street and they would say, "Hey baby how you doing?" and as soon as they were out of your earshot and eye view [they would say], "[They] have the ugliest hair I have seen in my life." That's how the women would do it, the men, I was five and half years old, I'm sitting on my grandpa's knee, he has his group of friends around him and he told this joke and [laughs] I am not a person [who], I don't believe in such a thing as an ethnic joke, but when this came out of my grandpa's mouth I looked at him, I am this little bitty five year old kid and he has his friends around him and he looks at them and takes a puff of his cigar and says "I don't know why they call us Negros, my knees haven't grown in years." And I am like "Grandpa!" I could not speak for the rest of the day to him, my little five-year-old self, I was shocked. It takes a lot to shock me but that did [laughs]. It was that kind of flavor and that kind of community sense and we had this little store called "Mr. Butler's Store" and it was the coolest store ever! You could get comic books, cause he knew we would come after school, he would rip off the covers of them, they were supposed to be 25 cents, he sold them to us for eight cents and he said, "I'm only going to sell this if you do your school right and you come correct and you come right." And I was like "okay" and kids knew that was the hang out, they would line up to go to "Mr. Butler's" because he had those really big cinnamon rolls and he made everything big, which is how he stayed in business, cause he knew we would come right after school and would want to eat the things our parents wouldn't give us to eat, like cinnamon rolls and Twizzlers and all that stuff. I would say it was always colorful, always something under construction in the neighborhood and I think that was one of the reasons that inspired me so much because in our neighborhood if our teachers wanted us to learn about making bread they would arrange for a field trip to the Butter Crust bakery in San Antonio, Texas and we would make bread. If they wanted us to learn about dance we would see the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, if they wanted us to learn about music we would see the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra. Hands on, hands on, all the time and that how I thought education was like everywhere! Big surprise when I got to New England, nothing, nada, nothing, nothing, nothing! So much of that has gone and that is why, when I tour with my one-woman show, when I speak on social justice panels and speak about that work, that has to continue! If you have to make those connections I mean, there are so many kids these days that, believe it or not do not, that do not know about the Civil Rights Movement, or about the social justice work, or about Medgar Evers, or about Fanny Mae, or about Bessie Coleman, or about Madam CJ Walker. All that stuff is in social justice because they were philanthropic, they were trail blazers, they did things first, first, first. And that's why I am touring with my show because people have to know, because they have to know about social justice, and that's kind of what my neighborhood was like.

MM: Do you think that impacted the way you look at the world, through social justice?

TG: Oh gosh, yes! Let me talk a little about my social justice work, because it is pretty far reaching. In the Worcester Public Library there was a panel about social justice and equal pay inequality for women and men and here it was nice because there were four or five of us and we sat there and we talked about it and I guess we must have struck a cord because this one woman stood up in the middle of the thing, in the audience, and started arguing with someone else in the audience! We were like “what are we going to do?” And then she stopped for some reason, looked at all of us on the panel, caught up, collected her things and she left. That made me think, if this small panel, and there were only like five of us, talk about social justice to the extent that it was that detailed that it impacted people’s lives because some people know what it is, and some people don’t. But that made us realize that conversations like that need to continue because I am also very active in union work for the MTA, which is the Massachusetts Teacher’s Association, and there are all sort of social things that are coming up. The Dreamers, the whole gun violence thing. I mean I was kind of shocked, maybe I am naïve, but we have a big meeting every year about social issues called the Annual Meeting and it is held in Boston every year. We talk about social issues, education issues, and things like that, that we affect us for the upcoming school year, we had gotten to the new business item section and I was stunned, “New business item number seventeen” was “should we come to school in the Fall of 2018 armed?” Now imagine me, “Hi Ms. Gaffney, how are you today?” “Okay boys and girls let’s do the ABCs while I have a gun strapped to my hip.” NO! My resume says, actor, activist, and educator, it does not say Gunslinger from the O.K. Corral. Absolutely not! And it scares me because we were 1,500 strong that Saturday, if we had to vote on it, it means it is picking up steam in the legislature and that social aspect is really, really kind of scary to me, because you know, I will say this, postal workers are not the only people who can go postal. It could take two teachers about a minute who are upset with one another, they could get upset, kids could find out where it is in the schools and create little gangs and cause anarchy, that is in the history of ideas, the worst idea I have ever heard! And yet talk about more social stuff, I don’t know if you have heard, about a week and a half ago, well now it’s been longer, before the April vacation week, the Norrback School which is not too far from me (Nelson Place School in Worcester MA), they had to call the state police, the local police and the search dogs, and search every child’s backpack in the entire school, there were sixteen bullet casings found in that school and that is an elementary school, not a junior high, not a high school, an elementary school and that’s a scary thought, because I had mentioned to you earlier the things we had to worry about in elementary school, we never had to worry about this sort of stuff. So I think, no, I don’t think I know, social justice has to continue being explored and participated in because if social justice hadn’t been in our society think of all the things that would have never happened, the civil rights wouldn’t have happened, rights for women certainly wouldn’t have happened because people have to you know, find about that that will make them want to get up, stand up and get involved and get it done. Just like a perfect example of social justice for me, was the film *Hidden Figures*, look how long it took people to find out about those very brave courageous women doing all that stuff for NASA and a music producer named Pharrell Williams was one of the people that helped spear head getting the film out there. I was like yay, Pharrell, yay yay, yay, because you know I think social justice is really over looked by a lot of people because they don’t know what it is and it is also a lot of different things to a lot of different people and that is also one of the reasons too

why I find that social justice work and my work as an actor [work] so nicely because I have been an actor since I was about three years old and I also know how incredibly important [it is] that you have to find out what you are passionate about when you find that it has such a huge impact on the lives of everybody else and you have to keep doing it. But it's exhilarating, it tiring but it's a good kind of exhilaration cause you know you are making a contribution to people's lives. [laughs] My mom looks at me and says, "Tina I love you but listening to you talk makes me tired!" and I am like, "Gee Mama, I guess I chose the right profession!"

SGC: Let's go back and discuss your early childhood.

TG: Let's go back! I went to elementary school in John Glenn Elementary School and that was named after the famous astronaut and I think that was the very first place I got involved and was introduced to social justice because we had a speaker come to our school. I was about in the third grade or so, and this person, the thing that I always remember about them was that they came in and they didn't say a word and they just went out on stage and they just looked at us and they kept looking at us and I am thinking, "Why isn't this person speaking?" And they turned around and they had one of these clicker things and they had these slides come on the screen of different times in history the Suffragette movement, the Women's Rights movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and I was like, "Wow." And there was this one single [slide] before they started, their presentation, and it was, "There are so many ways you can make a difference but the best way to make a difference is to get involved." I was like, "Oh." And here I was in my little third grade, eight-year-old self not knowing too much about it, but I remember that one person standing there on the stage who hadn't said a word to me before, who I had never met could be that impactful and that powerful. After the presentation, I got in trouble [laughs] with my teacher because I went and I had like fifty thousand questions to ask but I have always had this unending curiosity about ways to enrich people's lives and ways to let them know more about social justice and that they can get involved and that it doesn't take a lot, it just takes an interest, so that you can see, "Well if I start finding more about this, and I end up talking to people we can get a smaller group together and they can start talking and it kind of grows and grows." Now if I go all the way back to fourth or fifth grade, I remember, the very first time I saw adults participating, in a protest because they were trying to get equal wages. That was the first time it was like in front of me and I was like, "Wow this is really important." Then I started talking to my mom and my family and driving them bananas, asking, "What can I do, I'm only eight or nine, what can I do?" So finally, they finally they literally took me to City Hall and I actually went to those big chambers and they said, "This is where this happens, this is where this happens, if you want to get in to a City Hall environment and find out what you can really do when you are nine years old, talk to such and such a person. And I started talking to such and such a person as it turned out later would be Henry Cisnero, who turned out to be the mayor of San Antonio, Texas, and I was like, "Oh my god!" At the time the governor was Henry V. Gonzales and they had like a father and son relationship and I was thrilled to see that cause Gonzales was mentoring Cisnero and it was going really well, and I was like, "This is great this is what we need to see, people of color doing well, then of course the news broke about a year and a half after that Mr. Cisnero decided to be unfaithful to his wife and everything fell apart, he was a Harvard educated guy had it all together, ended up being the mayor of San Antonio and I was like "No, No, No!" But then after I sat down and thought about that it really spurred me on

about what I want my social aspects of my life to be and now from sit ins, I've participated in, to stand outs, to phone banking, to just coming and talking to people and having a one on one conversation about how do you want to make a difference? What's worked for you, what hasn't? There have been times it has taken me three years talking to one person to get them to come to one meeting. But after three years' time I showed up, I showed up at the meeting and I was like, "Maybe this is will be the day they'll come, maybe they come," and I turned around it was the exact people I'd been talking too for three years, to get them to come to one meeting. That's what I mean when I say social justice work can be invigorating, it's a good kind of tiring, its tiring, but it's a good kind of tiring cause you know its palpable, you know its making a difference. You know it has far reaching effects or it wouldn't have lasted this long. After that, what did we start doing? We started running for elections in my elementary school, the first year they came out I wanted to find out more about it, so I didn't run the first year, I ran the second year for student council, won that.

MM: I'm sorry what grade were you in?

TG: Oh, I'm sorry, this is moving in fifth and sixth grade. The first year I found out more about what running for student council would be like, so I spend the first year researching it, then by the time I got into six grade, I felt I was ready to run, did that, won that. Then I ran for crossing guard captain, didn't have any experience at all but you could see at [that] point I wanted it to [show] people how a part of social justice is people's safety, so I ran and then I won that.

SGC: What year was that?

TG: That would have been, '74ish, '75ish.

SGC: What was the political and kind of cultural, racial climate of your school?

TG: Well, a lot of time the staff at a school will not match up with the demographics of the students it will be eight-five percent Caucasian and maybe a little bit, fifteen percent African American. I liked John Glenn [her elementary school] because it was pretty diverse, I mean that was the first place I met someone from England in my life, her name was Melany Anderson, I remember it to this day, she had blue eyes, brown hair and she was one of the kindest, nicest people I have met on earth. I really liked that there were a lot of people that looked different from me and a lot of people that looked the same from me. What I think made the biggest impression on me about that, that led to my work in social justice is that here is a group of people that don't necessarily all know each other some of us do, some of us don't but we are coexisting, and we are coexisting peacefully. Do we always agree on everything? Of course not! But do we work to learn about other people's perspectives and what we have in common, our commonalities, so that we can build from that? Not only build from that but build in a more positive direction and listen to each other's ideas? I will tell you one of the frustrating parts about social justice is you get in a circumstance where people will say we have to have a meeting to discuss when we will have a meeting... and then we will sit down to [finally] discuss something.

TG: It was for my Four H Club... where you learn about agriculture and how you do environmental things and you grow things better, how you make things better, how you make things healthier for people. I don't know if they exist anymore.

SGC: Yeah.

TG: Yay! I still learn that I still have a lot to learn, that's the biggest lesson you will learn about social justice, there is always a lot more to learn. It's always an ever-growing field [especially the various perspectives] in social justice period or social justice theater.

MM: How about middle school, high school?

TG: Middle school, high school let me think.... My junior high school when I moved there had never had, I don't know if you all still have them here, do you all have school flags?

MM: I think we might, yeah, we do.

TG: Okay, well my junior high school had a school flag competition [and the winner] will have their flag adapted as the official flag of the school and I was like, "Wow I had never heard of that before but that sounds educational." I entered it and I won! They were like, "Tina Gaffney's flag will be adopted as the official flag of Jones Middle School in San Antonio, Texas. I was like, "I actually won?" because there were like six hundred fifty kids at that school and little me who did know much anybody from anything, I was like, "Okay wow, oh my god!" That was 1976.

SGC: What did your flag look like?

TG: It was gold on the top, black on the bottom and it had a cougar's head in the middle because our mascot was the cougar's. My prize, because it was ninety-seventy-six, I won a set of Bicentennial coins for the Bicentennial, I was like, "Oh wow, okay." That would bring me up to high school, oh my god. High school, high school, I should tell you I went to more than just one junior high school and more than just one high school cause one of my parents being in the military, we moved around quite a bit. When I started high school so much stuff was going on just in the country, good lord! There was women's rights in the seventies and all sorts of different things happening. It was a little bit after, do you know who Billie Jean King is was, famous tennis player? She had that famous tennis match with Bobby Riggs, there was a movie about it. There was that going on, there was a lot of stuff for women going on, there was a big push at that time, I'm not saying it was the beginning, for equal work, equal pay. I got really involved in that because it never made sense to me, for two people to be doing the same job and for one to be paid more than the other, that's ridiculous, completely ridiculous. I got into that pretty much at the beginning of high school and then there were some theater people who came to talk about the huge disparities in my group of theater, between women and men is ridiculous. Julia Roberts can make a film for twenty million dollars, Harrison Ford can make that same film and he'd make like eighty million dollars, for the exact same things. I sat there and was like, "That doesn't make any sense." Now with social justice [working together] with my theater work, everything I do, I strive to make sure working conditions are good not only for me but that



there is a sense of equality for women and men and people of color and LGBTQ. Cause everyone really just needs an opportunity, if you get that opportunity consistently, they will be able to strive more, they will be able to achieve to aspire to and if you say you can't do this, this and this, social justice says, "Well yes you can do this, this, and this." I mean a lot of people are unaware that Martin Luther King's widow and Medgar Evers' wife actually met and had a conversation about a lot of these different things and see lots of times in African American heritage month, in February, because think only of the same five names Martin, Malcom, Medgar, if you are lucky Harriet Tubman, if you are lucky Sojourner Turner. Through my social justice work in theater, I started my one women show "African American Women of Achievement Performance Series" because we are not just—being a slave was part of our culture, yes, but there is so much that we were. We were kings, queens, princes, princess, educators, philanthropists, aviators, sculptors, the list is endless. I wanted people to know, which is why I socially go to places, like churches and synagogues and political places and schools and first night celebrations and keep telling these stories because I know if I don't tell them they are never going to get told. The reason social justice, I think, has impacted me as an actor and has impacted me as activist is simply because, it has a huge impact, it lets people know, if you are one person all it takes is a start and if you are one person you can talk to somebody about it and say, "Hey I heard about this."

Now when I was in high school, I was lucky because we had a high school newspaper, but can you guess what I loved to talk about every week? When we used to have manual typewriters, before we had computers and all that other stuff. Here is my column this week on social justice and why you need to know about it (1) it's good for you (2) it will help engage you about your community (3) it will help you get you with other people you don't know (4) you will have a commonality. At first when I started it, I will be very honest with you people laughed in my face and said, "Nobody is going to read this," but I kept at it and slowly but surely, I'd start to get a little response and then a get a little response more now. I'd started that because when I moved my freshmen year to that high school of course nobody knew me there, and then when my older brother and sisters went there before me they went, "Oh Gaffney, right, right, right, we know your sister and we know your brother." So that was a help and then I slowly started to climb, and I started to do social justice here and then I tried really hard to combine that with the theater department, saying that you know plays are nice, but we need to start doing things that have relevance, we need to do things that have importance. That's when we started doing things like *To Kill a Mockingbird* which is a play and book which is going to be around forever that is when we started doing things, that in the theater world we say have some meat on the bones. An emphasis on social issues and women's right and things like that and it really showed me the fact that someone who had never even met me at that school and said, "You know what you typed" or "I'm really glad that you are doing this sort of work because nobody had ever told me this before, my family never knew about this, and the very fact that you wrote that."

I mean it wasn't a big column. It was maybe a paragraph a week, but you know everyone has to start somewhere. You know that really took off and that really let me know two things about social justice that I believe are two really big components of it. The printed word is huge because some people may not feel comfortable speaking in front of people, but they will sure read and if you do the spoken word, some people may not be interested in reading, but if they hear

something that you have to say it may inspired them on to say, “Oh wow, they did that in terms of finding out about social justice and being active in social justice, maybe I can do the same thing, or something similar to it.” That connected tissue? Huge, huge, huge. So that brought me up to me junior year in high school I would say, my junior year in high school well let me see, that would have been 1980. My junior year of high school I was trying harder to convince the administration of my school that we really needed to do meat-on-the-bone theater. Because most of the time they had to go to the school board who wanted you know predictable theater, “Let’s do a musical, isn’t lovely and nice?”

There is so much more theater we need to do! I took a lot of flak for that, I wanted to do theater that reflected the world, that makes you think, that makes you upset, that challenges your way of thinking, that encourages you to go, “Wow this made me upset!” But why did it make me upset? “This made me happy!” But why did it make me happy? This made me think about stuff I had never thought about before or revisit an opinion that you thought you had that maybe now you have a new perspective just based on what you seen or what you read. That carried me through most of my junior year of high school and I kept trying to get them to do things like even have some dramatic readings, kind of like, you know Alice Walker is one of my favorite authors, like some dramatic readings from the *Color Purple*, or dramatic readings from Maya Angelou, dramatic readings from Toni Morrison, you know? Very strong women that don’t get read in school very often and they should make a special request and you decide to pay for it yourself and get the books and supply it, so kids can have a sense of what that is about. [Additionally] we started having mock protests, it was really good because students chose the subject and the part of the school we would have it in and even the teachers wouldn’t know what the subject was going to be and I thought that was really fascinating because I thought, “Okay it is not going to be scripted by the teachers, it is not going to be scripted by anybody else.” For example, [we would focus on] why are we studying a certain book and not others in school? And we would have a mock protest about that or why are we not studying women’s rights or why are we not studying artists of color and these things were brought up. I could see it really started to take shape because the teachers started hanging around and I heard them in the hall ways ask each other, “Why aren’t these kids studying this? Why aren’t they learning more about women writers or writers of color or ways that social justice had started at the very beginning?” After the protest had begun, then the debates came and that was really interesting because they were trying different combinations [for example based on grade level, gender] those [debates] took on really great urgency and it got to the point where as a result of that we ended up having a debate team and I was like, “Yayyy!” And then the teachers said that when we started having debate clubs they could see such a huge difference in their students simply because of the social justice, their writing skills got better they were writing their speeches, their public speaking skills got better because they were presenting to their peers, and their confidence overall as students grew because of that and that started through most of my junior year which was 1980 and then like 1981, my year I graduated from high school, yay! What was the next big step that I took after? I started to get involved in radio and tried to tell all about people why you need to get involved in social justice and how you need to find out more about it. There was a radio station in our community, I don’t know if it’s there anymore but it was KSAT and it was basically, it was kind of historic because it was the only African American owned radio station at the time. I’m not sure if that is still the case now and it was really nice because we could really focus in on how

social justice can help lots of communities not just communities of color, not just women, but how it can help a lot of people because it really is just about showing connections. If you do sit ins, if you do protests, if you do debating, if you do phone banking, all those things are part of a very long standing or the social justice tradition because that is how you got the word out, you know we are going to meet at this restaurant [and] talk about this or there is going to be a protest here you need to get up, get out, and get involved. That happened through most of my senior year and we started to get outside my [high schools community]. We started to put posters and we would have adults who see them and, this was at the grocery store, and say, "What are you putting that poster for young men or young women?" And we would say, "Oh we are going to have a community meeting about social justice." And the older people [laughs] cracked me up [when they said] "What's social justice? I have never heard of such a thing." And I would say, "Why don't you come to the meeting and find out?" Well not all of them did but some of them did and it really amazed me about social justice is the tiny little seeds that you plant you are not sure if they are going to blossom, you are not sure if they are going to remain dormant, but you know they are going to grow in one direction. The very fact that all of those people were so affected that something that a tiny small group of people had done, had always stayed with me. After I graduated from high school in 1981, May the 28<sup>th</sup> 1981, I got into my college years, I was very happy because I found more socially relevant, social justice-based pieces of work, like there was a play called JB.

MM: Do you mind me asking where you went to college?

TG: Oh, I went to what is now called University of the Incarnate Word. It used to be called Incarnate Word College in San Antonio, Texas.

Her role in the play, the bag lady, she would sit there and write all the things about social justice and she'd sit there in the corner [and] in this little pad she'd write all the things she thought were socially wrong and socially right and she'd write all the things that needed to be [that are interchangeable] and then at the end of the play, she literally had a little tiny bit, there are two versions of this play, one where she does what I am about to tell you and one when she doesn't. At the end of the play, when she was writing all that stuff, she would stand up and say something like "ill full the world" things that are right, and what we can do to change it, so she was literally writing all about the ills of the world while the magic of the play was going on. That was my first year at the college.

I did a play by an Irish playwright named Brandon Bean, the play was called the *Hostage* and I have to tell you the role I took to preface what I am going to tell you, how this really taught me a lot about the connections I was mentioning earlier. My first big role in college was in Brendan Bean's play *The Hostage* by character's name was Evengaline Gilchirst. I was social worker for the Irish Republican Army. Now, opening night, I will never ever forget this, here I am with my littler sophomore self in college, right? I am like, "Break a leg, break a leg!" For people, for people don't know that's a way to wish actors good luck, I'm like, "Break a leg, break a leg, break a leg." I come around the corner and there were two actors, I will say engaged with one another, and it was a very interesting thing to see on opening night, of your first play, of your college career! So I said, "Ah.." So then I thought about it and I was like, "Well you know, social

justice is a good thing because this lets you know that if someone thinks they have the freedom to do that and believes they have the freedom to do that, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years before that never would have happened, they would have been arrested and thrown in jail. But the very fact that they felt free enough to express themselves in such a manner, I think is a direct result of social justice because that took a lot of courage to do that, you know they could have been taken out of the play, they could have been replaced, they could have been kicked out of school. But the very fact that, well I guess the dean did not want to be picketed by groups and that he let them stay at the time was a big thing and that really stuck with me because I was like, “social justice does work.” Because when the groups had found out about it they called the dean up that day and said, “We are going to picket you if anything happens to these two actors.” [The dean] was like “Oops,” because his daughter was in the cast with us, so she went home and told him every kind of thing about everything that took place and that was a big beginning for me.

Another one, one of my favorite playwrights is Ntozake Shange She wrote for *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* and it was that whole play that is really about social justice and what we were trying to get. Through after being abused, through finding their own way back from being in a dangerous situation, not necessarily having to do with the relationship but you sometimes it happened at work, through finding their own rights as a person, the whole play was about how they dealt with social justice, how one had to deal with losing a baby, how one to deal with finding a better circumstance for herself at work by finding out the social justice rights she had. So that’s what I mean when I say meat-on-the-bones plays, plays like that I was really glad that the school had the courage to do, because there are a lot of schools, that won’t have the courage to do that... that would have been 1981, but I didn’t do any theater for a while because we were moving around again. And then when I moved to Worcester in 1985, I had to find my way here and let people know what I did and that I was here first of all and that I was really serious about my career as an actor. Then my original plan was to teach during the day and do theater at night until my big break came along and again, I kept finding that education and theater and social justice kind of kept over lapping, so it was a mix of a lot of things and so m.

MM: Why did you move to Worcester, if you don’t mind me asking?

TG: In 1985

MM: Why?

TG: Oh why? Oh it was because either help my mom out with my family or be a starving actor in New York and I wasn’t about to be a starving actor in New York because I had seen that happen to too many of my friends and I was like, “Not going out like that, no, no, no, that’s not going to happen.” So, I was very fortunate that shortly after I moved here I hit the audition circuit in Boston. Now Boston I will say has it problems like any other place, they at least get to do more courageous pieces of theater. One of the things they were doing, [laughs] talk about social justice was a play by, I was so blessed and gifted to work with the playwright, her name is Anna Deavere Smith, it’s a play called *Fires in the Mirror* which is a true story from 1991 about the Crown Heights Race riots. Oh my gosh, for people that don’t know that work the Hasidic

community and the African American community were at odds with one another so it was kind of like a powder keg ready to go off and the Hasidic community was having a funeral procession and they didn't see this little seven year old boy that was playing on the street corner, a motorcade came around and ran into the little boy and killed him. As a result of this, four days of rioting and firing bombing and demonstrations followed. Now the playwright Anna Deavere Smith came to the Sea Walsh Theater at Sussex University and mentored us and told us how she wrote the play and how it was so important, she turned all these interviews—she interviewed people from both communities, from the African American community and the Hasidic community—turned those interviews into twenty four knock you on your ass monologues. She took this to Broadway and did all twenty eight monologues by herself, every night, eight nights a week. She earned a Tony nomination, she didn't win then. After the Rodney King thing happened, she did another called *Twilight Los Angeles*, used the same formula to do the same thing. What it really taught me about social justice was that play I was hired as a guest artist, I had to play like about twelve different roles but it really, one of the things I respect so much about social justice is that it really gives you a sense of putting yourself in someone else's shoes. When we did this play we made a political statement by doing the whole shoe bare foot, she had Caucasian people portraying African American people, she had African American people portraying Caucasian people. I give you an example of how the whole social justice thing went. She took us—our director's name was Dr. Marilyn Plockens, fabulously, meticulously done piece of work, I got to do the show twice with her it was fantastic—we went to Crown Heights to meet the people we were playing in the thing.

SGC: Wow!

TG: That is a life changing experience, you are never the same after that.

SGC: Where is Crown Heights? In New York?

TG: Crown Heights is in New York, exactly right. But we had to sign confidentiality agreements because we were not allowed to tell the people that we were playing who we were playing, so we had a complete sense of confidentiality and we were impartial. One of the first characters I actually portrayed was another character I played was Robert Sherman, he was a Jewish man. Now when the play happened he was about eighteen. When I met him he walked into this deli, he was I want to say about twenty-eight to thirty, one of the kindest, sweetest people you ever met and he was very soft spoken and he just started talking, but he spoke so quietly you couldn't help but listen. On the other hand, another person I portrayed was Reverend Al Sharpton, now Reverend Al Sharpton, whether you agree with him or not, he has what we call in the theater performance behavior, he has got so much charisma and energy, whether you agree with him or not you can't help but listen to him and now has a show on CNN where he espouses his views. And then the father of the child that got killed, from Guyana, his name was Carmel Cato and I portrayed him, every single night I did the play I was in tears at the end because he is talking about losing his son! I'm standing there at the curtain call going, "Oh my god, I am sobbing, sobbing, sobbing." But it amazed me because I figured out why I was sobbing because all of the social issues that come up about that, the race thing, the different socio-economic background of the communities, how those socio-economic backgrounds played into what happened in the

communities and I mean they are still in the healing process to this day! I went back to that when we did it the second time, they are still in the healing process to this day, they are still trying to mend those wounds, because they are trying to like Dr. Maya Angelou said, “We have more alike my friends than we are unlike.” They are still trying to find that connective tissue I was talking about, that will help them come together and bridge, you know all that pain and all that suffering. So you know it is a work in progress and I just felt so blessed that the playwright was giving up her time to work with us and told us how she came to do that and she said that she noticed that there were things that were missing in America, all about that, when I was talking about my neighborhood that I grew up in those connections, they have to come back, cause if they don’t come back you know it is not going to be a very good end for us, as a people, as a planet.

And so, when we did things like that, that was really eye opening for me because it was just around the time that the OJ Simpson trial had happened, and it really made me sit and think about of it. The race thing, the socio-economic thing, how it affected different segments of society, in terms of how they felt themselves to be perceived and I really sat and thought, “Well this is really what social justice isn’t? It’s about perceptions and how you are perceived, it about how you can make a difference, it about how you can work with people different than you, as well as are like you, to go on and back the world a better place, through your social justice work.” The very fact that it got to be in a kick ass play, I was fine with that, I was like, “Yay!” Because it has everything that an actor and a person needs, it challenges your thinking, it makes you happy, it makes you angry, it makes you hopeful and to me that is something that has to been there, you must always have hope, no matter what on this Earth you do, you must have hope, because you know, you know, because someone very dear to me once said, “We are feeding on hope, aren’t we?” And I was like, “You have to write a book with that title! Feeding on hope are you kidding me!” Because literally you are doing that the moment you are born, you are feeding on hope, but all of us have done it. So, when I really took a look at the OJ Simpson thing and how that really divided people, I remember to this day the day they announced the verdict. Oprah was still on T.V. five days a week and she was in her studio and they showed a place where a lot of Caucasian people were and they showed a place where a lot of African American people were and when they read that he was found not guilty, the African American people cheered and the Caucasian people were furious. I’m only saying this people I don’t know if you remembered it.

MM: Yeah, I do.

TG: You do? Okay, and that really made me look at the whole justice thing because I thought well here is a case that I have never seen divide people so much that by the same token, this is also a case, the Crown Heights thing and the OJ Simpson thing that presented an opportunity for social justice to be there. This is also an opportunity for people to come together, to say, “Well I know we have been hurt by this, what are we going to do about it?” Because we can’t leave it like this cause it will fester and get worse and worse and worse or we can come together and sit down and agree to come to a table and say we have to get on with this and make this better. And to me social justice is all about finding ways that are going to affect positive change. On this planet for people to make things better you know? And so, I am very, very fortunate to be able

to do projects like that and to be able to do things like touring with my one-woman show and to do the one I have wanted to do since I was in high school. I finally got to do *A Raisin in the Sun*, are you familiar with *A Raisin in the Sun*?

MM: I've heard about it.

TG: Okay, well for people who don't know *A Raisin in the Sun* is a story about this mother and her family and the mother has inherited ten thousand dollars from her husband's insurance policy and they have to figure what to do with it. The problem is they live in a very segregated neighborhood.

SGC: Milagros, in our theory class that James Baldwin film, do you remember that?

MM: I think so yes.

SGC: He showed clips of *A Raisin in the Sun* and talked about how it influenced him and the author was the one who went and spoke with Bobby Kennedy, right, and she left, I don't know if you remember it, I've shown it to so many classes, its permanent in my brain, I'm just making the reference there for her.

TG: Thank you, the author's name was Lorraine Hansberry, one of my all-time favorite writer people ever and she was a woman of color. And the children in the play had all sorts of ideas on how to use that money, they didn't much care about what the mom did. But then the daughter brought the point that, "Well you know we really don't have any right to say what to do, it's her money." And so it goes through a series of things in the play and I wanted to portray the role of Mama Lena Younger, since I was in high school, so I was shocked that in Portsmouth, New Hampshire—that is really one of the whitest places you can ever be in your life—a director said, "Hello, I am looking for Tina Gaffney," and I said, "Speaking," and he said, "My name is such and such and I'm doing *A Raisin in the Sun*," and I was like "Whaat? When are you starting rehearsals, where are you at, how soon are you in, how far are you in the process? Sign me up right now okay." I was like, "Oh my god, I wanted this since I was fourteen!" And finally in 2001 at the Players Ring in Portsmouth, New Hampshire we did *A Raisin in the Sun*, it got great reviews, life changing play. You kind of can't mess up *A Raisin in the Sun* it is a classic piece of American theater and it deals with all the social issues, non-equanimity of pay, women being treated different than men in the workplace, the roles women had, are you going to be a home maker, are you going to be someone who works, are you going to be seen as equal by the person you are in a relationship with? All of that is in *A Raisin in the Sun*, on top of the segregation and all that other stuff, an amazing play, have you ever seen the play?

SGC: I haven't, and I want to take [her daughter], I want to expand her theater.

TG: Okay, in college I was a theater major, there wasn't even any other choice for me, I just took one look at the space and said, "Yeah that where I belong." And it's so important too because in social justice in some places it's really hard to find where it is you belong in the social justice world, you don't know if you are going to be the behind the scenes person making those calls and

filling out the paper work. You don't know if you are going to be someone right there on the picket line and that was something that you know, I had to find my role in the terms of social justice and then sometimes like with me, it's a combination of the public speaking and getting the word out and making those connections with people and the public speaking and the getting the word out and making connections with people I had a light bulb moment and went, "Oh my god, well this is what I have been doing in theater since I was what two something and now." So it kind of you know that connections were always naturally there took me a little bit to find it and once I found the similarities between social justice activism and theater work it just clicked.

MM: Wow, that's amazing, I never thought about theater like that, I mean I took theater for a couple of years but never from that lens, so it's really interesting. I guess my next question is talking a bit more about your experiences in Worcester and social activism.

TG: [laughs] My experiences in Worcester of which there are many and very proud to say I have a company here in Worcester called Stage Presence Production, it pretty much goes where I go and one of the things we did, there was a building here that used to be call the Worcester Artists Group up Harlow Street, kind of down street from the Harlow Street School which I think is still there the school, and we did a presentation there, the classic Ebenezer Scrooge, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. But the reason I got interviewed for is because in Worcester there had never been a women of color to portray the role of Ebenezer Scrooge ever and I said, "This can't be too difficult to change, change Ebenezer, to Esmeralda and everything else stays the same, so my production company along with another production company we went into that little cold theater and I didn't even care that it was freezing cold. I put my own money in it and I got that play done because I wanted people from difference socio-economic backgrounds to see, "Ahh, this is an attainable, achievable artistic goal, this woman got it done." I wanted people from all difference socio-economic backgrounds to come which they did. I wanted people to see that you could have a teeny tiny little space where we did the whole play, the three ghosts, the whole thing everything that you see in every movie ad we did the whole thing. I wanted purposefully to make sure that that cast was multi-cultural because again it's about making connections, it's about letting people know that regardless of your socio-economic background theater is—I like to tell people—an agent for change and it makes incredibly impactful, powerful statements just by making those connections like that and just by letting people see well, "Here is a version of *The Christmas Carol* we've never seen before, a woman of color is Esmeralda Scrooge imagine that." And it was funny because when I did it, the first time I did it was the For Theater, I played seven roles in that play I was the narrator, I was the beggar on the street, I was Mrs. Cratchit, I was the Ghost of Christmas Past, oh gosh who else was I? I was one of the banker people and then I was one of the other Ghosts too but the reason I it was because I was African American, my husband was Italian, one of my children was Japanese and one of my other children was Hispanic and I was like, "There is the Cratchit family for ya!" I was so thrilled. We got that done and then the For Theater went out of business and I mentioned to you about *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, well the third time I did to *Kill a Mocking Bird* the theater went out of business, it was just thing after thing, after thing, after thing. I even worked with Worcester's Children Theater and we did *Frog and Totter Friends* which is one of my favorite, favorite, favorite, favorite plays, love that play!



SGC: Where is Worcester's Children's Theater.

TG: It was right down at you know when you come down Main street and you see the building here and you go up and there is a little tiny building there that used to say Worcester Center of the Performing Arts? It's up on that bitty hill, right there that is where Worcester's Children Theater used to be and they went out of business. So it was all three of them and I was like "Really, really, really there has to be one!" Peter Pan's play was the only one I didn't get to work with but then they went out of business, I even worked Worcester County Light Opera, they did a musical version of Shakespeare's words called *Speak Low if you Speak Love*, and they took a lot of stanzas of Shakespeare and we put them to music and we did that, but I mean I was just so thrilled I will never forget that *Christmas Carol*. So I decided that when I produced it, it was this other person and I wanted it to be multi-cultural, I wanted it to be multi-generational, I wanted it be everything the world is, like I said earlier and one of the things people kept saying to me from all different backgrounds—there was this lady that must have been like eighty-five, she came up and said she was so happy to see it because the only very of *A Christmas Carol* she seen was the one that was in the movies, the one that you see every year and she was like, "Wow different people doing different things! I like it very much." And I was like, "Yay, somebody finally gets it, yay!" So that was when I made the connective tissue between my social work as an activist and my work as an actor because it's about, for me, affecting positive change, impacting people's lives positivity, letting them know like I said I'm a possibilities person and letting people know that there are possibilities out there, but you have to go and be willing to make the effort to make them to come to you and you have to be willing to put the work in to make possibilities for other people.

MM: Something I haven't asked you, is how do you think your role as a woman kind of affects your work and even as a black woman, do you think it impacts the way people interact with you within that space or do you think it's just, I don't know?

TG: Well, I'll tell you what my mom said she told me years ago, she said, "Tina Evez Gaffney, no matter what you do or how large your career, the first thing people are going to see when they see you is a black face." And that kind of took me aback for a minute but then I thought, you know cause that's her generation, and I respect her opinion because it's her generation, but then I thought I could allow myself to be pigeon holed into all I am is a black face or I could decide to expand my horizons, go beyond that and think, "Well that's what one generation chooses, that's the way one generation choose to express itself, that doesn't have to be the way I choose to express myself." I mean I know there are probably—actually it's good that you asked that question because I was on audition in Boston once and I walked in and said, "I'm here for my audition." Before I even said word one, the director was saying, "Thank you for coming, thank you for coming." I was there for my audition slot and he looked up at me and said, "I... oh I don't have any parts for you." And I was like, "That's interesting considering that you never met me, well I'm here now so I'll read my three lines and then at least I'll come here for something." And what I learned from that was a person who has never met me has already told me they have no use for me, that didn't work for me so that is why I went on and created my one-woman show *African American Women of Achievement Performance Series*. Because these are stories that have to be told and they are not being told in school and they are not being told in high school or

college or even junior high curriculum, so I figured I'm going to be the one to tell them. And when you said that to me, I think there are some times when people perceive women as you "can only do this type of role" or "you can only or you can only be this type of way" and what I say is, "A lot of people have told me they figured that it might be a setback for me to be a women" and what I say to them is, "A set back is a set up for a comeback" so, there you go.

MM: That's true. [laughs]

TG: My mom told me from day one I am a chugger, she called me her little engine that could because I keep "chug, chug, chugging along." She said that to me since I was like two and I'm about to have my fifty-fifth birthday on Friday. In terms of being a woman and in terms of being a woman of color, in terms of doing projects like *A Raisin in the Sun*, obviously it's a distinct advantage there, same thing for *Fires in the Mirrors*, a distinctive advantage there. There have been times when I have been into casting rooms and its eighty-seven easily percent Caucasian and I'm the only woman of color there but I choose to look at that not as a deterrent but as a spurring on, cause I'm like, "Okay you lucky devils, here I am get with that, I'm in the room." You can either choose to look it as something that deters you or you can choose to look at it as something that spurs you on. I chose to look at it as something that spurs me on because I also look at the fact that I wouldn't have been given the gifts, that I've been given unless there was a reason for that and you can either use them or lose them. I chose to use them for the great good of people kind on the planet, I hope that answered your question.

MM: It did. Well I guess my second, third question, [in relation to her theater work] is how do you see the role of social activism within Worcester public schools? How do you incorporate...

SGC: Did you get the history of all the jobs that she has worked in Worcester?

MM: No, we haven't, we can do that right now.

TG: I can start that.

SGC: Start with that first and weave in to that [question].

TG: Okay, so after I produced a *Christmas Carol* here, I was happy to get my radio show cause it was really, really strange, because they had so much more, I hadn't expected it to be what it turned out to be. I got a call from the Audio Journal which is the radio reading service of Central Massachusetts, their executive's name is Vince Lombardi, and is a very good friend of mine. And he called me up one day and said that [the person who] had the position before me had taken ill and he said, "You know I have been looking at your work through the years, Tina, and you're really good at what you do." And I said, "Thank you kindly." [He said] "So this is my roundabout way of asking do you want to be the music producer of the Audio Journal of African American Experience?" And I said, "Let me think about for exactly zero seconds, of course I do!" So I ended up writing, producing, hosting and people come on my show and they tell me everything from their socio-economic background to how the jobs they have had have made a difference, not just women but men too. I mean I've interviewed the first Asian mayor of

Fitchburg, I have interviewed bus drivers who have been around for like bus strikes, so the WRTA, and I tell people “ordinary people are never ordinary” and that’s the one thing I try to say to people, “ordinary people are never ordinary.” Okay, there is a girl that is twelve now and her name is Mikaila and she went on with her parents one time and she was—actually her product was lemonade—O was so shocked, I was reading to my students the other day and they got that Scholastic Magazine, that’s been around since and it’s like “oh my god that’s Mikaila, the little girl from Shark Tank, she’s in Scholastic Magazine!” And that what like a year ago, talk about social, economic success, this girl is twelve years old, she got a national brand, she’s a business person, she’s running her own business, she does philanthropic work for the Salvation Army in between doing her school work and she’s twelve! And that really made me think, well if the work that I am doing and the projects that I get involved in like the Audio Journal, I really make the point about asking people, “What’s your background first of all and making it a point of asking them how much do you feel your background impacts the work you do?” and then I ask them, “Do you think you would like to be happy or successful?” That question gets a lot of interesting answers, because some of them will go right to, “Well I make X amount of money a year” and then I nicely say “Would you rather be happy or successful?” and then they stop and say “Nobody has ever asked me that question before.” And I love the fact that it is called the African American experience because like I said our stories were not being told from a socio-economic background, all people thought about was slavery and violence, drugs and sex, slavery and violence, drugs and sex and I said there is much more of a spectrum to our people than that. We were kings and queens, princes and philanthropists and we are also innovators, educators, we are sculptors, we are—what is that lady? The hat lady, whose name I will think of in a minute, we are philanthropists, we are sorts of things but these things are never told and they are never going to get told unless we have things like *Hidden Figures* and so when he asked me to do that I said “Okay but if I am going to tell this I am going to tell the stories flat out and I am not going to leave anything out, because there is a whole world out there that people don’t know.” The traffic lights were invented by an African American person, Garrett Morgan. The first lady of color to get her pilot license was Bessy Coleman. Madam CJ Walker was like a seventy-hundred’s version of Oprah, she built one of the YMCAs, she helped fund Fredrick Douglass’s house! If you see the Rockefeller estate now the famous Rockefeller estate she has her mansion is called Villa Lewaro it is right next door to the Rockefeller estate. The 1700s for a woman, to be a woman of color, to have earned over a million in sales, to have a workforce of over twenty thousand women, she invented the whole African American haircare industry and after that she had to brainstorm, what’s that, oh barnstorming that’s what I meant to say [laughs]. It was a meeting that W.E.B. Dubois has having with all men and W.E.B Dubois had heard about how socially active she was and how political she was and she was like, “You are not going to your meeting that’s okay.. knock, knock!” She busted into that meeting and said, “You didn’t come to me so I figured I would come to you” and in the middle of this meeting right there she started talking about social activism, she started talking about women’s rights and W.B sat there and went, “I can’t say anything else after that because you’re right. You should have been in my meeting a long time ago.” And as a result of that they developed a working relationship which led her getting funding from him to build that YMCA, to start her haircare industry which goes on today, and after she had passed her daughter took it over. And I tell people when I do this as part of my show I say, “I encourage you to look at pictures of Villa Lewaro online.” And the thing that blows my mind about her, besides the fact that she was brilliant, she started her entire

business with one dollar fifty cent and a dream, that was it. One dollar fifty cents and a dream and that is what I mean about possibilities in social justice, if she could do that in the 1700s and have an estate and have a car and have a business, imagine what you can do today with the resources we have in our disposal? So doing the African American Experience, I love the fact that people feel like they can come on and honestly talk about their socio-economic background, what activism they are in, and some people start to ask me what I am in and I start making my list and I'm like, "The show is only fifty-seven minutes, I can talk about it a little if you want too but it's really very good because it's all over the net, 365, 24/7, so I am wrapping my head around the fact that I am an actual world-wide radio producer, I'm still coming to grips with that reality, because there aren't a lot of women [who are] world-wide radio producers never mind of color. So its maybe three percent and I'm in that list of three percent, so I really like the fact, I'm really about people's beginnings and it amazes me that people feel comfortable enough and happy enough to come on and talk about their beginnings and what inspires them and what drives them and the things that I love so much about being a social activists and being an actor, that drive pushes you and it will continually push you, to makes that change, to make people realize that just one person, if your twelve or if you're eighty can really totally make a difference but you have to not give up, you have to keep having that hope, and you have to keep on, and keep on, and keep on until you affect that positive change and that is what I do on my radio show, I keep affecting positive change and inspire people to do just that.

MM: Any other work that you've been in Worcester over the years?

TG: Okay, oh god now I have to go all the way back, let's see, I did *A Christmas Carol* with another company, I did *To Kill A Mockingbird*, I did *Speak Low if You Speak Love*, I did my one women show so I toured with during the April school vacation weeks, so when you all had First Night, which is no longer here, I performed at First Night in the Worcester Art Museum doing my one-woman show.

MM: What exactly is you're one-woman show?

TG: Oh it's called *African American Women of Achievement Performance Series* and I do women like Madame CJ Walker, like Bessie Coleman, like I'll give an example, Augusta Savage was the first women and the only women to this point, the only woman in 1938, she was a women of color who was a sculptor and she did this beautiful statue of a little boy playing marbles and she called it *Gayman*, that statue was so good that she was the only women of color at the 1938 World Fair and had it exhibited there for all the world to see. If you think about that in 1938 that was incredible, incredible because women period did not have that much stuff exhibited then in fact she had a whole thing of it there just for her work was incredible. So, things like that are in my show, Madam CJ Walker, Bessie Coleman, the ones that are lesser known Augusta Savage like I said [pause] people go, "W" hat? They will get that Scooby Doo look on their look, what are you talking about? And they will have no clue who I am talking about it but the fact that they have no clue who I am talking about, lets me know that I am doing the right thing because they need to know about it. The only way you are going to find out about stuff is to ask, inquiry, and to be curious, curious, curious, and never stop asking. And my mom said that I drove her crazy from about the age of twelve, "How come the sky is blue? Why is my

doll put together?” She got me a doll and I took it apart when it was brand new, I’m so embarrassed to say this [laughs] and I took it apart completely and I said, “Oh so this is, fits into this, and this fits into this and this fits into this” and then I put it back together and she said, “Oh there is really something here.” The very fact that I try really hard with the African American Experience not to be pigeon holed into “it can only be about this” well no it can be about this this and this and fifty other things that have to do our experiences and our interactions with people, with our interactions as women and modern women that are setting the tone so that young women that come after me and come after you, and come after Selina, know you got to get on it, you got to get this done no matter what anyone tells you, you have to keep going cause if you don’t keep going, like I didn’t know until two years ago that the Xerox Corporation is owned and run by a woman. You know how many times I had been to a Xerox machine? I had no idea that was run by a woman at all. And I think, believe it or not even Tyra Banks said something recently that I thought was great, she had that show *America’s Next Top Model* the first time but then it went away and it came back, one of the things she said she spends her time doing is making opportunities for young ladies that come after her, to be their own boss, to be in charge of their own destiny, and to get it done. So I am trying to show through the African American Experience that when you put yourself into an endeavor and your large and in charge, as I used to say, and you have that input that you get to put in and you show people that it can get down and they say “Wow you accomplished all of that, imagine what I can do.” And that is one of the focuses that I put into my social activism work, that doing the roles I had told you about. And let me see, there was one time, when there was an ensemble of people from the Worcester artist group and we performed as an ensemble there at Mechanics Hall of all places and then let me see, there have also been some poetry reading that I have done because I write poetry also. Let me see, what else have we done? Oh yeah, The Black Bird Radio Theater Company was the theater company that was split into two parts, it had a live radio show which I loved and it had a theater company and shortly after I moved here I heard about it and I looked at the paper and I said, “Oh they are having auditions, I’ll go and I’ll do this.” So, I met the gentleman that ran it his name is Bill Gagmen, wonderful person and he hired me on the spot and said, “We want you to be in this our season is starting in weeks, can you do it?” [And I said] “Let me think about that for all of zero seconds, yes of course I can do it!” So that led to that and then we did *Arnie’s First Career*, I was a newspaper reporter, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, I’m trying to remember what role I did in that *The Farmer Takes a Wife*. I think I was the next-door neighbor mom and then like the Black Bird Theater Company went on for years so I did a variety of roles after that and then they unfortunately lost their funding so that got disbanded. But luckily the Audio Journal had picked up more stuff. They were in a separate location then from where they’re at now and they let me go back.

The Blackbird Radio Theater Company had a playwriting contest. I had never written a play in my life, I didn’t know what I was doing, but I actually got an honorable mention and I was like “Oh my god!” And then I entered another one a second year and I kept moving up the ranks and I got third and second after that. And the Audio Journal they had started to do some plays and were looking for a producer and again I guess my name kept coming up so I was directing it, producing it, and being in it all at the same time [laughs] which I actually kind of dig because the more roles you get to do stuff and the more stuff you get to do, you get to explore those aspects, figure out what they are about and figure out if one or more fits you. And again, I would say the

thing that is so great about the Audio Journal is that you get to come on and talk about these aspects of everything from activism, socio-economic backgrounds, what makes people stay will the activism that they are going. A very dear friend of mine Lenny Cooper passed away a few years ago, two or three years ago, and one of the things he was into was activism. We always saw each other at protests with the school committee meeting and City Hall. Oh we also picketed together and done a lot of really great work. And a friend of mine who was the president of the local branch of the NAACP here, Pat Yancey, and I had many great conversations, she and her husband had been on my show about how socio-economic and social justice has changed in Worcester and she has said that she has seen it shift one way and then shifted back another way and sometimes she would say it was really, really good because people were really enthused like during the Obama administration. Oh, I miss the Obamas, oh my god! I don't care if you edit that out [laughs]!

MM: No, I won't [laughs].

SGC: You can say what you want [laughs]!

TG: And she said she had seen it shift a lot for the better than obviously what state it is in now. So I didn't want to make you loser you appetite but I really like the fact that people come now and they talk about their socio-economic background and they have seen the different demographics change in Worcester which leads right back to the social justice because you have different populations, different things take on different priorities and take on different meanings you know? And she said how she saw that change and then she said that she was really glad she had the opportunity to talk about it because as the president of a national organization most times people ask you are about the organization, they very rarely ask you what you think about policies, what you think about education, what you think young women can learn from STEAM which is a new one. Most people know STEM which is Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, the new one is STEAM, which is Science, Technology, Arts, and Math, and I'm so glad that finally got included because that is something that to me should be mandatory to every school, it's not but it should be so. So that is a really good socio-economic outlet that I talk about the activism how we got to make things better and keep working together as women, as young women, as people to keep making things better one matter what we do, because to me that what social activism really and social justice is really about.

MM: And I guess one of my final questions is I think what I asked you before, kind of incorporating the educational aspect to it and the theater aspect and social activism aspect and how do you view those as a single unity or separate unites coming together as one?

TG: Well its interesting because the theater and social activism kind of dove toe each other. When I was at Belmont Community School years ago and I was doing my one-woman show the principal looked at me and said, "Most of the kids won't sit here for ten minutes. You got them to sit here for like an hour, how do you do that?" And I said, "Because you make the information interesting, you allow time for kids to ask questions." Every kid on the planet is naturally curious, that's just a rule, I learned that a very long time ago because the same thing is true of me, I am a naturally curious person and if you feel that curiosity and you give them an

opportunity to—one its cool to ask questions, two its very cool to be smart, three you get to be smarter by asking more questions—oh they will go forever! And the educational aspect of that getting them to find information, be excited about learning that information all has to do with social justice because the only way you are going to find out about the policy, the procedure, and the people that go with social justice is to find out about it, ask those questions, take that action and you know the more you get into that rhythm of social justice, you'll find you do the same thing in acting, you have to find out information, make that action, get it together, use that creativity, anybody that's been on the stage will tell you, one of the things that's so great about being on the stage is that you always feel at home, your creativity comes out, your expressing yourself, that's your time, that's your moment. In social justice you are having moments but those are moments that are going to impact a huge number of people because you are getting more people together and getting more people together so I'd rather look at the educational aspect of social justice as you're educating people with positive information to affect positive change, in a positive direction, I look at theater as you're informing and you are presenting to people in a positive direction to get them positive, you know ways of looking at things and hopeful things to see, that will encourage them and enrich them and strengthen them and therefore, you're educating them in an artistic creative way to make them be inspire, see what they can aspire to and see what they can become.

MM: Is there anything you want to add that's essential to your story?

TG: Well, I'd like to say, as corny as this may sound, I'd to say thank you to my mom for always letting me and encouraging me to keep exploring and keep exploring and keep exploring and keep exploring because that really pretty much made me the woman that I am today. I tell every kid I've ever trained or ever worked with keep exploring, keeping asking questions, find out what you can do, don't wish for other people to do it. You know it's that Gandhi thing, "Be the change you wish to be in the world." And you really have to do that, take it by the hands and say I want to do this, get it done and people will see that if you did it they can do it too.

[Break in the Interview]

[Interview Restarts]

SGC: Do the egg story.

TG: Oh okay, just tell me when it's on.

MM: It's on.

TG: Okay, so when I was in Girl Scouts, you know when you see them wear the sash? To earn all those badges and stuff, I was trying to earn my cooking badge and my Cub Scout leader said these exact words to me, I was eight years old, "All you have to do to earn your cooking badge, Tina, is go home cook something, have your mom sign this paper and you're done." And [I thought] "Oh okay that sounds so easy." So, I'm booking it home with my little eight-year-old self as happy as can be and was like, "Mama! I have to bake something for Girl Scouts!" And

she's like, "Hold it, hold it, what do you have to bake?" [And I said] "She said I just have to bake something or make something, you have to sign this paper and I get my badge and it's done." And [my mom said], "Tuna fish pretty easy, get some tuna, some bread, mix it up but it in a bowl put it between two slices of bread and you're done." And I'm like, "Okay I can do that!" So, what does my mother do? She invites the entire neighborhood of people, to squish into our little tiny living room to try these tuna fish sandwiches. Now I am making a plate of tuna the size of this table, so I am groaning under the weight of carrying this whole plate of tuna fish sandwiches into the living room. Plop them down them down on the table and I am like, "Oh they are here, good!" My mother said, "Here are the directions, get the bread, get the tuna, put the eggs in mix it up, spread it on the bread, put the slice on you're done!" So, I was like, "Okay I got the tuna, I got the eggs, mix it together put it on them bread, put the slice on the top put them on the plate and I am done!" So, the doorbell is ringing, everybody is coming they are like, Ooh those tuna sandwiches smell really, really good!" And I am nervous cause I'm in third grade and thinking "This has to be good!" So, people are coming in they are streaming in the house, they are trying to be supportive, they are trying to see if I am doing the right thing, because they know I love being a Girl Scouts, right? And I was like, "I made tuna fish sandwiches, they are on the table, go enjoy them." And they said, "Okay. Oh boy those sandwiches look really good!" And my mom said, "I just got the sandwiches, the sandwich bread, I got the tuna, I got the eggs, mix them together put them in, she signs the paper, I get the badge!" They were like, "Well it looks like you got everything right!" So, the whole neighborhood, sitting around the table, each take their sandwich, they put them in their mouths, and all of a sudden, I just hear, "Crunch!" She forgot to tell me to take the shell off the egg. I thought they were going to kick me out of Girl Scouts, I was like, "Mom, I can't go to school tomorrow, nope, nope, nope, not doing it, not doing just not going to happen!" Luckily my Girl Scouts leader was my mom's friend Skip Akon. She explained to them and they gave me my badge anyway [laughs] because I did the rest of the mixing by myself, but I followed her directions. So, whenever you are in school and your teachers give you direction please follow them to the letter! If you don't understand, ask again! Oh my god, I thought I was going to get kicked out of third grade! I thought I was going to get kicked out of Girl Scouts! Everybody was like, "Mmm, crunchy and they taste really good, I like them thank you!" But they were trying to be so supportive of me. So that was what I was saying about community earlier. These days it's really hard to find a community that will support you. Did you see the film, what was that, what was that girls name? Not *Akeelah and the Bee*, the other one, yeah *Akeelah and the Bee* she went to the spelling bee....

TG: But yeah that was I was talking about, about community and then I had my little brothers to thank for this other one. I was selling my Girl Scout cookies, you've seen people sell Girl Scouts cookies at your school? I had the boxes, all I had to do to win the contest, because in ours it was a regional thing in Texas and they went by the number of cookies you sold total, to see where you placed. So, I had my cookies and the most popular brand of Girls Scout cookies is the mint one, they are the most popular, so I am like "Okay, I got two boxes left to sell, that's all I have to do, I will have met the quota, and I'll get my badge!" So, I am walking up the stairs and going into the house and all of a sudden, I hear this rustling and I'm like "Okay, it's probably nothing, probably some bird out of the window." And all of a sudden, this rustling got louder, it's sort of like, like [pause] and I'm like "Okay so what's that?" [laughs] I go into the kitchen, my two little



brothers are sitting in the middle of the kitchen, covered from head to toe in my mint chocolate cookies. They ate the entire two boxes of cookies.

SGC: [laughs] Did your mom have to buy them?

TG: Oh yeah, she did! And she took that out of my allowance for at least a good six months. Learned a good financial lesson then, keep cookies out of reach of your little brother. I know that now, didn't then but I know it now, they were just sitting there, cause you know they were like (...) they were just so cute! How are you going to get mad at a kid that is—you can't do that! I was like "Mom I am so sorry," and was like "that's okay this is going to be a financial lesson for you" she was completely, utterly, totally right. But I mean things like that make me really grateful, thankful, and blessed for what I have. Since being in Worcester one of the most meaningful experiences I have ever had was being in this play called *We Grow into Courage* which are dramatic readings of the women's civil rights movement and we are in the second season and for people who don't know Dr. Gallo Cruz from Holy Cross is pivotal in getting things like this done, because she has this indomitable spirit which kind of runs all the way into *We Grow into Courage* and it's about these women's voices and we do dramatic readings, the women who were in the civil rights movement and if you listen to the things they went through, I mean one of the characters that I portray talks about how she saw this girl taken from this earth in front of her. If you see something like that it changes you, you won't believe it, and it talks about that, it talks about the conditions they had to do protests and fights for voting rights and fighting for women's rights. There is a song, in the play its really about—they talk about not letting the sheriff not letting them turnaround from their focus which is getting those rights for women and it sort like (singing) "Ain't gonna let no sheriff turn me around, turn me around, turn me around, ain't gonna let no sheriff turn me around, I'm gonna keep in walking, keeping on talking, marching up to freedom land" and the reason I love the lyrics in that song is the very fact that they keep reiterating, keep on walking, keeping on talking, again to me is what social justice is really about through theater, you have to keep on going, not let go, and not give up, no matter what comes in your way, that's why I said earlier, a setback, is a set up for a comeback, cause that something in your way you have to push it and say, "No, no bye, bye, I have things to do" and you have to get it done. Men have been doing it for years and years and years and years. They are called trailblazers, go getters. When women try to the same thing, we get called words that are not very kind but they are learning very quickly now that if you have that perseverance, that stick-to-itiveness, that intestinal fortitude that is within you, that become part of your DNA at least it has for me, and you cannot let it, you can't let it get in your way. There is a very good children's story time, I do when I story tell, it's called *Amazing Grace*. It's about this little girl whose story is the same as one who wanted to audition in her elementary school for *Peter Pan*, her friend in the class leaned over to her and said "Oh Grace you can't be Peter Pan cause you're a girl, Peter that's a boy's name," but when her teacher asked Grace kept her hand up. Then one of her friends came over and said, "You can't be Peter Pan cause he is not African American," but Grace kept her hand up! And she kept going, and going, and going, and then she had a relative that was from a different socio-economic background from Trinidad come and take her to see a play that was a stunning new Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* at the ballet. She took Grace and Grace sat there with her eyes open like this [mimicking wide eyes] and said, "Who is that?" And the grandmother was great she was like, "That's my little niece, Rosily, she from Trinidad,

her friends asking if I want tickets to see my little Rosily dance well this time I said yes we have to go.” Well after Grace sees her dance and sees what she can do, she’s twirling the whole weekend, so by the time the auditions come up at her school for *Peter Pan*, the kids voted one kid to be Captain Hook, another person to be Wendy, and Grace took a deep breath opened her eyes and imagined herself flying and flying and flying and flying and the kids knew, everybody knew that it was going to be Grace for Peter Pan. She was a big huge smash hit and at the end of the story and right at the middle of the story, the thing that I love the most is that that grandmother keeps telling that little girl, “You can be anything you want to if you put your mind to it!” And that’s key and that was a big key for me getting into social activism, you can get things done but you got to put your mind to it and not give up.

You’re are going to face deterrents, you are going to face people who will tell you no, no, no, no but it’s that’s tenth no, that if you work hard enough you can get it turned in to a maybe, and then you get it turned into a slow maybe and you get that slow maybe turned into a quick yes that’s what fuels me in social activism and social justice work, that’s also what fuels me in theater too. So when we did *Grow into Courage* the first season, I was so excited because we had incredibly talented women then, just like we do now, but it was the first one, and that will always have such a special place in my heart because we were all in it for varying reasons, some hadn’t done theater before, some had done but I was the only professional actor member that was cast in the show, but it was so exciting to me so see younger women who were just learning about things about the suffragettes and social justice and social activism through theater that I watched their growth in season one and by the time we had done it two or three or four times they were just like “I just got that or I just got this!” And you could see that light bulb moment and then so exciting to me to know that social justice through theater and social activism through theater, it really impacts you, it doesn’t just impact the lives of other and yourself, it impacts you in your head, it impacts you in your mind but most importantly it impacts you in your heart and in your soul. So that was a connective tissue that I found in doing *We Grow into Courage*.

SGC: Where in Worcester do you live, do we cover that?

TG: Oh no, I live sort of over by the old Greendale Mall that is about to be torn down at the end of the summer. Yeah, they are going to close it because about seven years ago it stopped making money.

SGC: Where the TJ MAXX and the Best Buy is? Oh wow.

TG: Some millionaire benefactor came and said, “I am going to give you this amount of money to give you five more years to see if you can turn a profit.” It didn’t, then they decided plan b was going to be to turn it into Pre-K to Twelve school to compete with Abby Kelly up the street from me, that fell through too. So by the end of the summer that’s it, over and out and when that leaves your Worcester will no longer have any malls in it at all, that’s it, Yeah really bizarre, to me because Barber’s Crossing was gone a few years ago, your Higgins Armory Museum, I couldn’t believe they closed that, that was ninety years that building had been there, I was stunned! I was like “You have a beautiful, first class, world renowned museum and you are closing it, I’m shocked!” And then they took all the armory from their and they moved it over to

the Worcester Art Museum which is where it currently is so, I was really shocked by that. But you can see all the cranes there and when I get done teaching at the beginning of the day I am like, "I can't believe this is not going to be here anymore." It's been here since I've lived here, and I moved here in 1985, but obviously since before I got here but it's going to be so weird not to see that there anymore, really strange to me.

SGC: Can you say a little bit about your experience in Worcester as a city? Like what has changed for the better, you've told us about the theater community quite a bit but what about other aspects?

TG: Oh okay, let's see, do you want me to be truthful or do you want me to be tactful?

SGC: Yeah.

TG: Okay, just remember you asked for this. Shortly after we moved here, it was myself and my brother, my two brothers, and we were looking for a gift for my mom for her birthday. And obviously we couldn't have upset anyone because had just moved here! We hadn't been here a week! We were going downtown and, "Oh look there is a coin store!" They collected those very old rare coins that people collect, and we were like, "We can trade in our coins get some money and buy a gift for mom!" So that's like, "That sounds good!" We are not even in the store, yet the guy comes out from behind the desk goes to the door and says, to all three of us, "No matter how valuable your coins are I am not going to give you the full price for them." And I am like... If it had just been me it would have been one thing, but my two younger brothers were with me and I wasn't going to allow that. We went across the street to the next store before we had even made it all the way across the street, the guy from the other store comes out, he said, "The proprietor from the other side of the street called me and I'm telling you now I'm not going to give you full price for them." And I'm like this is two times in the last five minutes, we hadn't been here for a week, how could we possibly upset anyone? So I went to see a lawyer the next day and this is exactly what I was told, "As long as they do not use the N-word in your presence they treat you pretty much any way they want too." And that was in 1985, so... and that really didn't sit well with me, so I kept trying to find ways to make that better because I could see the looks on my brothers faces they were pretty crushed and I was like "I'm so sorry about all of this." Cause I mean it was 1985, it wasn't 1863, it was 1985 and the fact that there are attitudes like that and that there are mindsets like that, makes me even more determined to work so that we can eradicate that. This weekend I was just at Building Networks to Eradicate Racism through the MTA and one of the things we kept talking about was, how attitudes are, how things are lacking in curriculum in Worcester and Auburn and surrounding towns and how those things need to change. I tell everyone that it is laughable at best that I hear these senators say things like "No there is no need for multi-cultural education everybody's history is the same." [laughs] Here is a dime buy a clue! Please, Please! It just befuddles me, to think that peoples diversity, and people's backgrounds, can't have any sense of equanimity in the Worcester Public Schools not only that teachers need to be equipped and then we went through strategies that we can do to make change for the better, like having teachers introduce things to kids, having the tools they can have like now there is a wonderful series of fairytales called *Fairytales for Every Child* and I love it cause its multicultural. I have to tell you the title that won my heart, I did not know this

book existed on earth, and when I did I said, “These people must have known I was on earth” You’ve heard the story of the Three Bears, right? The title of the remake is *Afro Tina and the Three Bears*, and I went yayyy! Finally! Finally! This cute little girl has these Afro puffs and a little yellow dress and ohh and I was dying laughing. There used to be a store in Worcester called *Afro Books* and I was really happy to see it because it was a bunch of multicultural books with strong female characters [with different age ranges] and I was thrilled to see that, and I was like, “This needs to be around like all the time!”

And we talked about solutions to things like socioeconomic disparity, we talked about how we could create and add mindfulness and talk about social justice and social activism, along with things like diversity in the schools and even at a young level and the first things I said was teachers need to be equipped with the equipment to get that done or it’s not going to happen. And there was have many times as an educators I’ve gone out bought books, bought supplies and I’ve given them to my students mainly because no one else is going to do it or the school district will say “We don’t have money in the budget so you can’t do it” and I said, “I’ll buy it all myself, I will go to Amazon.com and find the merchandise, thank you so very much.” So that is exactly what you end up doing because if you want topics that are that far reaching and global like social justice and social activism, you have to have your own tools, you have to make sure your kids are prepped by you to explore that area because it is just not necessarily in the Worcester Public Schools curriculum it’s just not there. So I’ve talk to them about Kwanza, I’ve talked to them about Madam CJ Walker and other people because I believe in making opportunities for people to be curious and the more curious they get the more their minds will expand, the more their minds will expands, their education will be richer for it and they will be richer people too. So in that regards I think Worcester has a lot of room to grow. There have been some changes I’ve seen like at least now I think they are having the African American festival

SGC: Juneteenth?

TG: Well, well it used to be two separate things because there was some infighting between on agency and another one but the Juneteenth is pretty much reserved for Connecticut, the African American festival they have here which is good, because there was no smer it got really, really bad and they didn’t have it at all. Too much infighting but at least they got past that so now they are trying to incorporate Juneteenth like you said back in so, you can learn more about a culture, you can learn more about a holiday, you don’t know about and for people do don’t know what Juneteenth is, you know how every year in this country they celebrate the Fourth of July, the fireworks and everything? Juneteenth is when people of color actually got our independence and like most people, after the Emancipation Proclamation was written, people thought, “Okay that’s it,” well not necessarily the case so like in late June in some places, June the sixteenth when it started to be on a larger scale, a lot of people are unaware of that just like a lot of people are unaware of Kwanza. Kwanza has only been celebrated in this country... did that in 1968 so not for a very long time and trying to get that word out is something Worcester is a little slow on the uptake about doing but it is slowly, at a glacial pace, getting better.

SGC: Okay, I think that is a good note to end on. Thank you so much.

MM: Thank you.

TG: You're welcome so much, please do this again when I'm like eighty and see how much I remember.

Supplementary Information: Written by Tina E. Gaffney

In 2001, I saw in the trade papers that the AADA East [what we actors call the East Coast Version-the West Coast version is called AADA West] at the time, they were only selecting two people from each state. You could have scraped me up off the floor when, two weeks later I received my acceptance letter stating I had been selected!! My first thought was, "Finally, a chance to focus on nothing else but my career! I will be in one of the most diverse places on the planet!!" There were 20 people in our group, we were actually called "Section Eight, and there was only one guy in the entire ensemble! I'm thinking, "Excellent! I will be surrounded by all different sorts of people during my time here!!!!!" You can imagine my surprise when I discovered that I was one of only three women of color in New York? I was stunned. I had to provide myself with a place to stay for the duration of my training. I took Advanced Acting, Movement, Singing, and Diction. I thought it was interesting that this was the first place I studied that had a library that you couldn't check a book out of! Needless to say, it made final exam week a rather unique interaction. I had my first fundraiser thrown for me to help offset the costs, a Boston theatre group called Playwright's Platform who invested in my artistic success. The audition process is not at all like they show on TV, the panel of 5-6 people in a darkened theatre. I auditioned for one man, a guy named Dino. After he saw my audition, he asked me one question, "Why do you want to be at the AADA?" My response was this, "My grandma said, 'Whatever it is that you can see yourself at 3 o'clock in the morning, that's what you were destined-to do!!!!' My entire career- has led up to this."

I did a piece called "A Piece of My Heart." This piece covers the interactions of a group of multicultural women as they gather to talk about their interactions in the Vietnam War. The social justice aspect of this piece is that my character talks about how she sees the world and how it treats her in terms of having to defend herself during wartime, women's rights, and civil rights. The piece really delves into the pressures of this character regarding carrying (and filling all of these roles) in the piece. It was one of the most gut-wrenching pieces I ever did because this character had to make constant choices about what she felt to be just, fair, and in the best interests of her and those she cares for. I also had the opportunity (twice) to portray God and if that's not a role when you have to make decisions about social justice for the entire universe, I don't know what is!