

SONHS Black History Month Profile

Saluting Thelma Anderson Gibson

A life of service and perseverance, from the hospital to the community

For over 50 years, Thelma Vernell Anderson Gibson has been a trailblazer in education, mental and physical health, community leadership, and volunteer service in Miami-Dade County. A registered nurse who began her career in 1947, she continues to advocate for her community's health and well-being. At age 92, she remains involved with the University of Miami as a trustee emerita and cherished member of the School of Nursing and Health Studies Visiting Committee.

She attained her goals at a time when it was uncommon to find women or racial minorities in high-level roles. An eloquent speaker, she shares her story generously, to inspire future generations and spread hope in her lifelong community. Notably, Gibson published her autobiography, *Forbearance, the Life Story of a Coconut Grove Native*, in 2000 and delivered a TEDx talk, "Square One: The Power of Reinvention," in 2012.

"We despair," she said during the talk. "But I say it's always important to forbear. You can reinvent yourself."

History forced Gibson to reinvent herself many times.

A child of the Great Depression, she was born in 1926 in Coconut Grove to Sweetlon Counts Albury Anderson and Thomas Theodore Anderson. Her family included some of the Grove's original Bahamian settlers. Gibson was born on Charles Avenue. "I was delivered by a midwife right here, in what was called 'colored town' at the time. We had no street lights and no running water," she told *The New Tropic* in 2016.

She graduated from George Washington Carver High School in 1944. "It was completely segregated," she continued. "I remember going to Burdines and I couldn't try on a Girl Scout uniform because of the color of my skin and I couldn't try on a hat because they said our hair was too greasy."

Gibson left Miami to study nursing at Saint Agnes School of Nursing in North Carolina in an era when racism and segregation were the norm and women weren't expected to earn college degrees. She was a member of U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, established to ensure the country had enough nurses to care for its citizens during World War II. The government covered her three years of nursing school plus six months of specialized training. Gibson chose operating room technique.

She wrote to Jackson Memorial Hospital, she explained during her TEDx talk, hoping to apply her new skills there, "...and they sent me a letter giving me a job," she continued. But when she arrived, they took one look at her and said, "Nurse Anderson, you can't work in the operating room, but if you work on the colored floors and get the experience maybe one day you can work in the operating room."

After two years at Jackson, she tried to get a position in an operating room in Washington, D.C., with a similar result. "Well, they didn't want to tell me that the laws said coloreds can't work with whites," she said. Undeterred, Gibson returned to Jackson in 1951 and continued pursuing her academic goals. She earned her bachelor's degree in nursing education from Teachers College at Columbia University in New York in 1959. (The University of Miami was still segregated at that time, she noted.)

During her 33-year nursing career, Gibson worked in a number of health care settings, including the E.J. Hall Clinic in Miami, Gallinger Memorial Hospital in Washington, D.C., and Mount Sinai Hospital. At Riverside Hospital in the Bronx, she worked with teens struggling with substance abuse. "It was my first real experience knowing what drug addiction could do to young people," she recalled.

Gibson also spent four years at the Dade County Health Department, where she became the first black assistant supervisor of nursing in 1964, she noted. Three years later she married Reverend Theodore Roosevelt Gibson. He was the priest of her episcopal church and later appointed to the Miami City Commission. Along with her husband, Gibson promoted the civil rights of black residents in Miami.

And though Gibson never worked in its operating rooms, she was invited in 1984 to serve on the Public Health Trust of Jackson Health System. That same year she founded Miami-Dade's first Women's Chamber of Commerce, still in existence today. Gibson is also the founder and president emeritus of the Theodore Roosevelt Gibson Memorial Fund, Inc., established after her husband's death in 1982. In 1997, at age 70, she took on a new role in politics, serving as an interim Miami City Commissioner.

At the turn of the 21st century, Gibson helped establish the Thelma Gibson Health Initiative to address the needs of South Florida's disenfranchised populations. In 2002 the Theodore R. and Thelma A. Gibson Charter School opened. In addition to these continuing enterprises, Gibson has served on countless boards and committees, including the Jewish Home for the Aged, Coconut Grove Cares Mental Health Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Visiting Nurses Association of Miami Dade County, United Home Care Services, and Grovites United to Survive (GUTS).

Her many honors and awards include the AXA Advisors Healthcare Heroes' Lifetime Achievement Award, the U.S. Department of Commerce-Minority Business Enterprise Lifetime Achievement Award, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Drum Major for Justice Award, the Jewish Home and Hospital Women's Auxiliary Sacred Heart Award, the Jackson Memorial Hospital Image Committee Award, and the National Conference for Community and Justice Silver Medallion.

Even faced with rejection and racial prejudice, Gibson always found new paths that motivated her to succeed and move forward to do great things.

"I didn't think of myself as being different. I know there were people who didn't want to be friends with me, but I didn't care because I had enough people who loved me," she told The New Tropic. "As far as nursing was concerned, I worked in the colored wards taking care of people who were really sick. When I sat in a classroom, I never thought I was any different because I was able to keep up with whatever it was. I could run rings around the other nurses. I felt like nothing could stop me. But you know what, I never did work in an operating room ... but I've been satisfied."

In her TEDX talk Gibson also marveled at being invited to sit on UM's Board of Trustees in 1997, some 40 years after she'd been unable to attend classes on UM's campus. "Now young people need to understand this," she stressed. "You can keep on keepin' on—and you have to be a dreamer. You have to dream about what it is you want out of life—and then be willing to go on and work toward getting to that point."

SOURCES:

<https://thenewtropic.com/thelma-gibson/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzpriA8vAzs>
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