

Black, White, and Blue: Vivien Thomas Exploring the Cure for the Blue Baby Syndrome

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When I started searching for my topic for this year's theme, "Exploration, Encounter, Exchange," I knew I wanted to stay away from the cliché of an explorer like Christopher Columbus. I am a very creative person. I did the individual performance last year and absolutely loved it, which is why I decided to do a performance again this year. While I was looking for my topic, I knew I would have to relate to that person in some way so I could play their character. After looking at the NHD website, I became aware that you can do exploration of a new field, or exchange of ideas, and this enlarged my selection choices. At first I was going to do Wilson Greatbatch, the creator of the pacemaker, as multiple people in my family have had the pacemaker surgery. I could not relate to Greatbatch's character, so I continued to search for a topic and landed on Vivien Thomas. Thomas was in the same field of Greatbatch, they both did cardiac surgery though Thomas intrigued me more than Greatbatch.

Vivien Thomas fits the theme of, "Exploration, Encounter and Exchange." He played a critical role in saving thousands of lives by finding a cure for the Blue Baby Syndrome. He overcame discrimination from colleagues for not having a formal college education and for being one of the few black surgical engineers' in the field. He explored the cure for the Blue Baby Syndrome by conducting over 50 surgeries on test subjects, dogs. He exchanged ideas with Dr. Helen Taussig and Dr. Alfred Blalock to find the cure for the Blue Baby Syndrome. He encountered a lot of racism outside of work because it was the 1950's and inside of work because he was a black man in a "white man's" job.

I started research on general websites, so I could get a quick run down of Vivien Thomas. I came across an online exhibit about Vivien Thomas and his coworkers Dr. Alfred Blalock and Dr. Helen Taussig. This exhibit was by the Alan Mason Chesney Foundation, and it gave me detailed descriptions of Thomas, Blalock, and Taussig's lives. It also gave me many primary resources, pictures, and articles made in that time. This exhibit led me to more information at Johns Hopkins University, where Thomas did most of his research with Blalock. I also conducted an interview to learn more about how Thomas' impact on how cardiac surgery is looked at today. I listened to multiple interviews with Thomas to understand his perspective on his life.

After researching, I wrote my script. It took many attempts to get the script to how I wanted to portray all of the characters. I then started searching for my props and costumes at local thrift stores. Lastly, I practiced and practiced, and since I am doing an individual performance, I figured out the blocking as I went.