Joseph Walter Thompson, born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1933, was the first person trained as an operator of the 1951 Whirlwind computer at the MIT Digital Computer Laboratory. In this interview, he discusses his early career at MIT running Whirlwind, and then his long employment at RAND/SDC as a programmer and eventual group manager working on the SAGE continental air defense system software. Thompson also discusses his early childhood and also provides insight into his day-to-day life as an African-American working in the early days of computing.

David C. Brock: Joe, thanks for taking the time to speak with us today. I thought we could begin with your full name, birth date, and the city in which you were born.

Joe Thompson: Okay. Joseph Walter Thompson, January the 10th, 1933. I was born in Baltimore, Maryland.

Brock: You mentioned that your mother and all of her sisters were in nursing. Is that right?

Thompson: Right. And as I say, I don’t know whether my mother caught some kind of a problem while being a nurse to cause her to pass away so young. I have an aunt … well, she just passed away, but she used to come and sit with us during the last few years.

Brock: What were the major activities of your parents and in your household? Was religion a big part of your household, or politics, or music?

Thompson: It’s hard to say. It wasn’t so much politics. It’s probably music. And I think the Bible was read a lot, but I don’t remember going to church that much. When my mother died, and I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle in Boston, I attended church quite a bit. In fact, I was
confirmed as a Roman Catholic while in Boston. And interesting enough, when I was born, I was Christian, baptized as a Roman Catholic, even though we were Episcopalians. I always thought that was interesting. But in any case, my sister was very, very bright. She actually skipped a year in high school. And she graduated number one from her college.

Brock: Wow.

Thompson: She was very bright. And she ended up also as a sort of caregiver. One of the experiences she had was one of the kids there—he seemed to be always hungry and not be taken care of. So, one day, she decided to go visit his family and see why he wasn't getting food or bringing lunch to school. And the family didn’t care. They just didn’t. And she said, “At that point, I just decided to give up being a nurse,” or whatever type of caregiver she was.

Brock: Were you and your sister big readers when you were young?

Thompson: She was; me, not so much. I became more of a reader once I went to Boston. It turns out I had had a heart condition … I could not engage in sports or gym classes. And during that time, I did a lot of reading. I love to read. So, that was good.

Brock: Was it at age ten that your mother passed away?

Thompson: Yeah, it was at age ten. My sister was eleven.

Brock: So, that was 1943 then.

Thompson: Right, right.

Brock: Had you gone to a neighborhood public school in Baltimore up to that time?

Thompson: Yeah.

Brock: Could you talk about what your community was like in Baltimore?

Thompson: Well, I remember we moved several times. And the last time was … I remember the name of the street. It was Etting Street, and it interfaced with North Avenue and was pretty much Afro-American. There was no mixture. It wasn’t that it was a problem. It was just that we didn’t mix with other groups. Although, I did because, when I moved to Boston, of course, it was quite different. Neighborhoods were mixed more. But they weren’t mixed that much where I was in Baltimore.

And I went to school. Of course, I was a sort of a nerd in a way because I just loved books. I loved to study. And again, I did a lot of reading when I was not able to go to the gym or to do sports.

Brock: In what area of Boston were you living?

Thompson: Roxbury, it was a suburb. And my uncle was called a “master barber.” And so, once I adjusted to being there, I ended up being a shop boy. I would walk to the shop, and I would sweep up the floor, I would brush off the customers. I got tips. And I would put on my favorite station, which played old adventure stories. Later got a shoeshine stand where I would shine shoes.

Brock: At your uncle’s shop?

Thompson: At my uncle’s shop. And I remember one day, this fellow came into the shop to get his shoes shined. And I shined his shoes fine. And when I left, everyone said, “Do you know who that was?” “No.” “That was Count Basie.” It turns out that across the street from the barbershop was a large place there they called the Hi-Hat where they had entertainers. It’s a restaurant and I guess entertainment facility. And that’s where he was performing. And he came over to get his shoes shined. But I spent a lot of time, obviously, in my uncle’s barbershop.

Brock: I’d like to hear a little bit about your high school experience, where you were going to high school and how your interests were developing.

Thompson: Well, Boston Technical High School was the name of the school. It’s just a matter of liking the teachers. And it was important that I was good with the teachers. I was sometimes
high above my class. We would have special groups, and because of my knowledge, I actually
went off to the closet area where the teacher came over and talked to me separately because I got
more information to give her than the kids who were in the class. I got all As in school.

Brock: Was there an area that you were really excelling in? Was mathematics special for
you, or was it language, or—

Thompson: It was everything. I can’t think of any particular. …

Brock: Did you have any particular mentors or teachers that you were especially close
with?

Thompson: Well, I always think of one teacher, Mrs. Green, because I had several classes with
her. One was ancient history. And that’s when she actually gave me a book she assigned because
of my interest in ancient history.

Brock: How was the Second World War a presence in your life in those days? Was it af-
flecting the community?

Thompson: That’s interesting because I was a shop boy at my uncle’s shop, which was during
that time period, and a lot of military people came in to get haircuts. I would shine their shoes
and talk to them. And they would give me tips and all that. But I never got involved in any mili-
tary stuff except … at that time, if you were a certain age, you had to go and be tested to be in-
ducted into the service. Well, I’m 4-F because of my heart. So I never went into the service. My
uncle, the one who had the shop, went into the merchant marines. And my dad never went into
the service. I’m not quite sure what the problem was. But I didn’t get too much involved in mili-
tary stuff, except for those coming into my uncle’s shop.

Brock: Did any other school activities catch your attention? What were you thinking about
doing when high school was getting toward its close? Did you have any particular career
aspirations?

Thompson: What’s really weird … sometimes in your high school yearbook, you write down
what you want to be. And my ambition was to be a barber.

Obviously, that’s not the case. But that’s when MIT came and interviewed me so that there was
not really much of a time period between graduating from high school and going to work.

Brock: Could you tell us about how that connection came about?

Thompson: MIT was looking for bright young kids who were not going to college. And so, they
interviewed kids from all the surrounding high schools. I got picked as the first one to do that.
And so, that’s how I got involved. And I’ve never had to look for work since.

Brock: So the idea was that you could both work and study at MIT?

Thompson: No, no, it was just to come and work. But after that, I ended up going to the MIT
night school.

Brock: And was it the case that they interviewed you, and then offered you specifically this
job with the Whirlwind computer? Or did they offer you different choices of what you
might do there?

Thompson: No, it was a job operating a computer in the MIT computation lab. The lab was
down the street from MIT. It was a separate building.

The deal was to work there as a separate thing from MIT itself. It was a computation lab where
they did a lot of work for different groups, different companies.

Brock: Had you had any exposure to computers before this time? Did you know about
computing and computers?

Thompson: No. It was all brand new. And so it was just a learning process.

Brock: And so this is 1951 now?

Thompson: Mm-hmm.
Brock: And it’s in the Barta Building?
Thompson: Right. Yeah.

Brock: So you were commuting in from Roxbury then?
Thompson: Right. Actually, taking a bus.

Brock: What was the training process like for you coming in? Had there been other operators for the Whirlwind computer before you?
Thompson: Well, they had people who were getting their degrees. They were either in masters or doctorate programs, and they would actually do some of the work themselves. So, they had no what we call “operators.” It was just the students, grad students, who were coming and running their stuff.

Brock: So you were the very first person trained to be the operator?
Thompson: The very first, yeah.

Brock: Who was training you, and what was that like?
Thompson: Well, that was Jack Gilmore. He would look a lot at the screens, and I would sit down and look there. And I just got used to the lights and the sound and learning how to read in the paper tape and then learning how to understand what was on the paper tape through reading it. You had to learn the computer cards, IBM cards.

I actually talked to a lot of people who worked there. I just absorbed all that as I was doing my work as an operator.

Brock: Was there a period of time where you were learning, and then they said, “Okay, you’re operating the machine on your own now”?
Thompson: Well, there had to be because I ended up doing that.

Brock: Yeah.
Thompson: And I guess it worked out fine.

Brock: I’m curious about the blinking of the indicator lights and the sounds of the machine. Were those things capable of telling you if the computer was operating properly or having a problem?
Thompson: Right. Yeah, you got used to it. If you’re going to load in these programs, and you knew what they were for, and you get to the point where you understand what they’re doing, you understand the sound because the sounds are different for the different operations. And when you’re operating, whether it’s putting in tapes, or cards, or using magnetic tapes, you get to know the names of what’s going on and the sound. And if something doesn’t sound right, you realize something’s wrong with the computer and you can actually stop things. You can actually even look at your tapes and see if there’s a problem with the tape, or the cards, or something. So, it’s a learning process you went through. But it’s something that I enjoyed. It’s hard to explain because in a way, I must have done a good job because that’s why RAND wanted to hire me to train their operators and then to learn programming.

Brock: Did you study programming as part of being an operator, or was that considered separate?
Thompson: I would talk to the people who were there and get to know them, and they could explain things and answer my questions and what have you. But because we were so new, it was a learning process. You end up just learning as you went along. And sometimes, you end up putting holes in a tape just to see what would happen, experimenting with some of your thinking to see how it worked out. I don’t remember how I ended up writing programs. But at any rate, it’s a learning process. And I guess because I just enjoyed doing it, it was great.

Brock: What was actually making the sounds in the computer? It’s an electronic computer? What would the sounds be?
Thompson: You’ve got all these vacuum tubes and transistors and stuff. I don’t know what was causing the noise. I just know that once you got used to a particular program being processed … if something didn’t sound right, you might even stop it and check: Are the tapes operating properly? Did the cards get in properly? Are there some problems with the tape? And if it didn’t sound right, then something’s wrong with the input, or maybe they have to change a vacuum tube, or replace this, or replace that. And so, you have to have technicians come in to check things and see what’s behind that different sound.

Brock: What were your working hours like? I imagine they were trying to maximize the time that people could run jobs on the computer.

Thompson: I ended up being alone working in the morning hours.

I would go in to school in the evenings. Then I’d leave school, go to work, and be there. And then I guess around six, seven o’clock, in the morning, I was finished. And then I’d get the bus and go home. It was a pretty busy time.

Brock: I can imagine. Could you describe your memories of what it was like physically operating the Whirlwind computer in the Barta building, what it was like in the building?

Thompson: Normally I always had everything I needed for that particular task. I had the paperwork and everything. So, I had all the cards there or would have the paper tape there. And you have to make sure that when you feed the cards in, they’re going in the right way. Everything I needed to run that job, I had with me. I either had it on the cart I brought out, or whatever. I could not stop in the middle of a job to get more paper tapes or more cards.

Brock: And were the results typically output to additional paper tapes?

Thompson: They were printed out. Sometimes, you may have to generate other tapes and stuff. But basically, the results that you wanted would get printed, and so the person who came in to get their job would get their cards or tapes back and a printout of the results. And then they would go check and find out where something went wrong. And sometimes, when you’re reading in the cards, something doesn’t work. And so, you have to make a notation of that and indicate that on the printout—what happened and why you had to stop loading because there was an error, and you couldn’t continue running. And that happened quite often.

Brock: There were other people working in the laboratory who were responsible for obviously getting you everything … all the cards and tapes you needed for the job?

Thompson: Actually, by myself.

Brock: You would assemble all those things?

Thompson: Yeah. This is a solo job.

Brock: So, you were an operator for Whirlwind from 1951 to 1955, is that correct?

Thompson: That’s about right, yeah.

Brock: Could you talk about the other operators? You were the first, but they trained other people to be operators of Whirlwind.

Thompson: Right. I think they hired more high school kids. But I really don’t remember much about the other operators to tell you the truth.

Brock: At the Computer History Museum, we have a collection of over 700 Whirlwind paper tapes …

Thompson: Oh wow.

Brock: … and some of them date to the era when you were operating it. The earliest ones we have are from 1954.

Thompson: My goodness.

Brock: When you started as an operator, were you kind of the youngest person in the Barta Building?
Thompson: As far as I know, yes.

Brock: And were there any other African-American people working in the laboratory?

Thompson: I was the first. The only time I saw an African-American come in was when they had tours, groups coming in from different colleges and stuff.

Brock: Let’s talk about how the job offer to join RAND in Santa Monica came about. Could you tell us a little bit about how those discussions began and what the job they offered you was?

Thompson: I was running their jobs and getting them results. And I guess over time they just felt that I could be of help to them if I was working for them, and that’s when they made me the offer. I don’t know how the offer was made. Obviously it was good because I left and went to work for them. And, you know, salary wasn’t what you call that great at the time, but it was just an interesting experience. And because I had worked with them in terms of running their jobs, I was familiar somewhat with the personnel.

Brock: So by the time that you came out to RAND, the decision had been made to develop Whirlwind into the SAGE system?

Thompson: Yeah.

Brock: And that RAND was going to really take a leadership role in that effort.

Thompson: Right. Right.

Brock: Had you been to California before you arrived for work?

Thompson: Never. When I joined RAND, the condition was that within two years I would be transferred to California. And so that was a condition of the hiring, namely that I do what I had to do and then within a couple years I would be transferred to California with my family, if I had a family at the time.

Brock: This must have been by 1957—had you gotten married by that point?

Thompson: Yeah, we were married in 1954. And we had three young kids.

Brock: When you got to RAND in California, was it then that you started to move into programming as opposed to operating?

Thompson: No, I was programming with RAND, and then when I was transferred to California, I did not do operating; I was strictly a programmer.

Brock: You were programming for the SAGE programming effort?

Thompson: Mm-hm.

Brock: Could you talk about what that was like? Were you using pencil and paper or coding sheets? Or were you punching cards? What was programming like? Were you sitting at a desk writing things down?

Thompson: We would sit down and discuss it, and what I would do was make a flow diagram that I would then develop to show the sequence of things and how they interacted. And then I had to write a program that would perform as the flow diagrams said in order to then get it converted back onto cards or tape or something and see how it worked. So it was a discussion up front, flow diagram the entire process, understand the entire process, and then annotate to show how you’re changing things, and then program.

Brock: Was this programming in the assembly language of the SAGE computer?

Thompson: Whatever language … we had a special program that would convert all the stuff you had, and you would get it out on tape.

Brock: It sounds like you had to go through all these steps.

Thompson: You had to go through and then you had to write it all down and then you had to get it tight and then developed to be picked up and do the job.
Brock: In the SAGE programming effort at RAND, how many people were in your organization? How many people would you say were working on programming at this time?

Thompson: Had to be hundreds … because, you know, there are so many different areas. I started out and then I became what you call a unit head. I probably had like, I don’t know, five or six people working for me. And then I became a section head with more people. And I became a group head with more people. And I became a branch head with more people. You know, I had probably 20, 30 people working for me. But it was a long process.

Brock: What was the composition of that programming group like, those hundreds of people? Was it mostly men? Were there some women? What about the racial diversity of the group?

Thompson: Well, there weren’t that many African-Americans or Hispanics. But my experience with RAND SDC [System Development Corporation] was very positive. And what I really liked about the company was that they made no distinction between male and female. If you were doing the job properly, you got approved and promoted … promoted to run an activity and make sure that you were running it for the company, not for yourself and that you were colorblind. What’s very interesting … this is a side story.

At that time I was a group head, and there’s a young man from Texas and he was using derogatory terms for black people. So one day, he was in his office. We had a lot of single offices. I went in, closed the door and talked to him about getting his act together. And we became the best of friends. And to me, it was a case of what you learn as a child and if no one interrupts and gets you involved in something else, you will continue to do that which you learned. And so to me this was a beautiful experience working with Tex—not as his direct or his supervisor, but as a friend. And so I thought that was neat.

But with the people, we had cases where women were promoted and salaried same or higher level as men based on their performance, and to me that was something that’s not being done enough today. But in my environment, it was a case of everybody performing and being awarded based on his or her performance.

We had a process where we had to go for a review. We’d get reviewed by our immediate boss, and then that write-up goes to the next level, and that’s reviewed, and then the next level up. So we got reviewed up the ladder to make sure that everything was progressing well. I felt that being part of RAND SDC was a very, very positive experience.

Brock: Do you think there was something about the nature of that programming work where it was somehow clearer to see, you know, who was performing well?

Thompson: We just had a lot of people doing work and doing it well and who enjoyed working together. There weren’t that many negative interactions. We had problems, of course … no one can go without having some problems. But in our early days, we were all like one big happy family. And I think as time progressed, you know, we kind of spread out and had other problems. But we did well, I think, as a company.

Brock: Were all the programmers together in a single building, or were you spread out?

Thompson: We were in different buildings. We had offices in Camarillo and Santa Monica and other places where we got together and made sure everything worked together fine. I don’t remember any major problems with trying to integrate everything, making sure it worked.

Brock: Did you need to get a security clearance right at the start of when you joined RAND, or was that later?

Thompson: I don’t remember when I had to get it. I just know that as I progressed, I had to get it because the work we were doing was of a secure nature and you had to have proper credentials in order to continue working on it. Because it wasn’t just the programming, it was discussion of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it, why this worked, why this didn’t work, what you had to do to change it—until you’re really deep into what you’re doing to make sure that everything’s going okay.
Brock: Did you feel any pressure on this project because of the position of SAGE in national defense and what was going on with the Cold War? Was there a feeling of pressure or urgency within the group?

Thompson: I didn’t feel that. We had a schedule that we tried to meet. I had a lot of discussions with the military where I had to go in and discuss what we were trying to do, what they were trying to do, and with respect to the part that we were doing, does it fit in properly and make our job easier or is it something we’re not doing that we need to do or that we need to fix? And what was great about that is that you could freely and openly discuss things with the military. You know, we weren’t playing, “Yes, Sir. No, Sir.” It’s a case of us just using first names if we wanted, and not necessarily “Captain” or “Major.”

Brock: And were most of those interactions with the military happening with organizations that were here in the Los Angeles area? I imagine that with all the activity going on in the area related to aerospace, a lot of the organizations would have been out here already.

Thompson: Yeah. We worked with aerospace and with the Sunnyvale Air Force Station.

Brock: The satellite command station up there.

Thompson: Yeah. And then we worked with the group here. And because I had a clearance level above top secret, I could discuss openly with people all the aspects of what was going on. And we would share things; it made life so much easier to do this. When we met, we met in a separate facility. We did not meet with the regular set of people. We had to be off in a secure environment to talk about what we were doing and how things were going. But I just enjoyed it. In fact, it’s kind of a funny thing. When we had to go occasionally and discuss things. I said, “I have to go in for an operation,” whatever it was. And they said, “Well, you know, you can’t go and have an operation.” If it’s unavoidable, that’s when my people would need to be there watching [during the surgery], “to make sure you don’t say something you’re not supposed to say.” I mean not that they would do that, but that’s what they were saying.

Brock: Well, that’s fascinating. Now at some point in time, I guess it was during the SAGE programming effort, your programming group within RAND became the System Development Corporation?

Thompson: Right.

Brock: Was that in the early 1960s?

Thompson: Had to be pretty early because once we went to RAND, we discovered that we were growing too big, and had to separate. It had to be in the late 1950s, I would think. [Editor’s note: 1957.]

Brock: And did you need to move the operation to new buildings?

Thompson: Yeah, we had to go to another building.

Brock: Was it your impression that it was a big change going from RAND to System Development Corporation?

Thompson: Not at first. It’s just a learning process. It was the same, you know, it was called RAND, and then it was called SDC, but it was the same people and the same organization. There was really no change, except maybe location.

Brock: Shifting gears, I wonder at this time of the 1950s into the 1960s, what did you think made for a good programmer? Was there a particular personality type or background?

Thompson: I would say that first they had to have patience and secondly that they had to be smart. Because one, if you didn’t have patience, you couldn’t get the job done. Because there are times when we got so frustrated by something not working. And if you got to the point where you just couldn’t handle it, you don’t need to be there. And so you had to learn to accept failure, but to also accept the fact that you will eventually get the problem solved and get it working. And don’t be discouraged by the fact that what you thought was okay is not okay. And to accept
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what people are saying and evaluate it from the point of view of “Does it help my job or does it make it worse?”

And don’t be afraid to speak up and tell somebody “no.” You know, I enjoyed the fact that you could openly talk about things and forget all the secret stuff and get a response and be able to talk to people. And just get things done. What’s sad though in a way is that sometimes because you are in charge of an area and there are problems, you’ve got to look at the problems and try to resolve them instead of worrying about getting the job done for work.

It’s just beautiful that people appreciate what you do and who you are. And the fact that they were part of that and you get the work done. And anyway, probably the worst part of that is that sometimes I’m told by my boss, “You’ve got to call Person X and tell them they are going to be fired.”

Brock: It sounds like you put a lot of attention and care into the group so you could have that cohesion and get the job done. Do you think other people in the organization were as involved with their people as you were?

Thompson: Oh yeah. I think we were a “person group,” and we all got together very well and worked okay. My group … I think at the time I was probably group head, maybe branch head. But at Christmastime I got this life-like little doll from them. And it had in one hand a whip and in the other hand a book or something.

And it had a note that said, “You’re tough, but I like you.” Something like that. I still have it. It’s hanging up in my den, this little character. But you had to let your personal problems not get in the way of you responding and helping people who were working for you or who you’re working for—it’s important, you can’t let that mess up getting the job done.

And so I just enjoyed working for RAND and SDC. It was tough to see the changes coming along as the years went by. After a while, it didn’t have that friendly informal atmosphere, and it just seemed like it was, “Do this, do that, do this, do that. Don’t bother me. I’m too busy. Do this, do that” kind of world, and that to me was bad.

Brock: Do you think that was because of the changes in organization, or was it in changes in sort of the work that the organization was doing?

Thompson: It was probably both. But it was good. I enjoyed the fact that SDC was so person-oriented, and then when Unisys took over, I just felt a lot of the togetherness disappeared somewhat. You know, it was like too much of a business and less of a person kind of thing. Not that I can complain about having a job, but it was just a different kind of environment to work in.

Brock: At some point, the SAGE installations get built and the software is running, but for System Development Corporation, and perhaps for you personally, was there a lot of continuing development for the SAGE system or software maintenance after deployment? Were you on SAGE for a long time afterward?

Thompson: Yeah, I was involved, and we would actually do the work, and then we would go to the Air Force and visit. We could watch and see how things were going and experience a launch or something.

Brock: You were at SDC working on different kinds of software and programming efforts across the 1960s and then across the 1970s. There was a lot going on in computing in those years! Could you comment about this time as higher-level programming languages and things like timesharing and computer networking are coming in? How did that change the way of making software?

Thompson: “It must be done” … schedules on time. “You can’t do this, you’ve got to do that.” I mean, you have to change your way of thinking, in a way, and how you go about and conduct business and working. Now, when I was going to work, I’d always work more than the normal so-called eight hours. I spent a lot of time at work. But when you are married and having kids, you just can’t keep doing that. You have to take care of your family at the same time.

Brock: Right.
Thompson: It’s not like when I was just starting out where I could just spend hours and hours and then go to school and come back and spend more hours and enjoy what I was doing and then getting things done. It’s not the same world anymore. You know, plus the world advanced.

Brock: What year was it that you took medical retirement from Unisys?

Thompson: It was probably about 1991.

Brock: During your working life, from the 1950s to the early 1990s, there were big changes happening culturally at that time. We have the Civil Rights movement, and I just wondered about your reflections on that. How did those changes in our broader society manifest in your professional or personal life?

Thompson: Now as far as women are concerned, it’s got to be real. It’s sad to see this, because when we worked, a lot of women were working or in charge, and they never had this problem of inadvertent aspects of the work. They were treated as a worker.

Brock: Right. What were the sorts of projects you were involved with, like big software projects, after SAGE? Were they military projects mostly through your career at SDC into Burroughs and Unisys? Was it mostly government work?

Thompson: It was mostly government work, yes. We interfaced with aerospace, with the military from day one, until the day I left, because we had to make sure that things were working right. I spent a lot of time on the phone with the military. I spent a lot of time going down face-to-face with the military. Those were not my enjoyable times. I am not a telephone person…. and yet we had a very good relationship. It was not a problem of being able to get on the phone and talk to a person on the telephone. In fact, when someone retired, I would go to the retirement party, which was in a park somewhere, and then they were all friendly … just great. And, so, it wasn’t so much that we were enemies; it was just an adjustment. But it worked out in most cases pretty well.

Brock: As you look back on your career in software and with computers, what do you think were greatest successes and your greatest failures professionally?

Thompson: I think the greatest success was that I would get the problem done on time and I would get the problem done so that it worked. And that was a plus. I think that’s why I got promoted the way I did, because I was able to handle the job and work with people well and interface with no major problems, and get the job done.

The problem I had was sometimes I felt as it went up the ladder of supervision, that those at the upper level were not aware of all the things we had to go through, and it often was important to sit and talk with an above-above supervisor and explain what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and what we see as problems. And when I was in the SAGE-SDC-RAND environment, it wasn’t that large that we couldn’t just go and talk. But as things started growing, it was difficult to always go to the right person at the right time to talk.

Brock: I wanted to ask you about the ongoing challenge about women and African-Americans participating in computing across this whole period of time. It seems that you were working in an environment for your career that was maybe especially good on some of these issues?

Thompson: Well, my experience was that it was based on performance and not based on how you looked.

Brock: Obviously, you spent a lot of time working very hard at work, but in your retirement and before that, what were the other parts of your life like?

Thompson: I’ve been in Marriage Encounter, good lord, since the early 1980s. It’s a group of people of different denominations who make good marriages better. We’re not as active as we were three or four years ago, but it’s a very important part of our life. Also, we’ve been in this house 52 years. We had a Neighborhood Watch for, like, 30 years. Very, very active and beneficial.
When I was working for SDC, as we left the SDC-RAND aspect, I was able to participate in various projects. For example, the company had a group of people who did what was called a “Youth Motivation Task Force.” We would go to the various schools that had some problems and would talk to the kids and try to convince them to stay in school, at least to get a high school education, hopefully go to college. And it’s very interesting: Once I went and the instructor was trying to get the kids to quiet down and I went over and I said, “Please leave.” And I took over the class. And that was wonderful. We got a lot of things done.

But the beauty of it was that work allowed me to do it. They allowed me to take off hours of my time, their time, to go talk to young kids. Now that’s a beautiful experience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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