

Vivien Theodore Thomas (1910-1985)



Background

- Born in Louisiana; raised in Nashville, TN
- Grandson of a slave
- Graduated Pearl High School in 1929
- Wanted to become a doctor, but unable to afford college due to the Great Depression
- Hired at age 19 as a laboratory assistant at Vanderbilt University Medical Center for surgeon Dr. Alfred Blalock; classified and paid as a janitor due to Jim Crow policies
- Went on to play an “integral role” in the “dawn of modern cardiac surgery”¹

Contributions to Cardiac Medicine & Surgery

- Even without formal medical training, his brilliance made him an indispensable partner of Dr. Blalock; invented new instruments and developed innovative surgical techniques in the laboratory
- **“Blue Baby” Operation, 1944:** Developed the Blalock-Taussig-Thomas shunt together with Dr. Blalock and Dr. Helen Taussig; spent years creating a canine model for Tetralogy of Fallot, a then-fatal disease of newborns; coached Dr. Blalock through the first operation at Johns Hopkins
- **Crush Syndrome:** Conducted research on hemorrhagic and traumatic shock, helping save thousands of lives during WWII

- **First implantation of Automatic Defibrillator, 1980:** Assisted Dr. Levi Watkins, Jr. in this milestone operation
- Known widely for his dexterity and masterful laboratory surgical skills

Overcoming Adversity & Leaving a Legacy

- Underpaid as one of the only Black employees at Johns Hopkins who was not a janitor; was not able to eat with Dr. Blalock in the cafeteria; worked as a bartender at Blalock’s private parties²
- Hired Black men as laboratory assistants, some of which went on to medical school
- Trained and directly mentored many of the most prolific surgeons of 21st century, including Dr. Denton Cooley, first planter of a total artificial heart (1969)
- Awarded honorary doctorate and appointed to the medical school faculty in 1976 after 37 years at Johns Hopkins University
- **In spite of the enduring obstacle of racism, Vivien Thomas became a pioneer of cardiac surgery, exemplifying ingenuity, perseverance, and excellence in his life’s work.**

¹Cooley, Denton. Pioneers of Cardiac Surgery. *Tex Heart Inst J.* 2009; 36(1): 79.