

Vivien Theodore Thomas

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivien_Thomas

August 29, 1910 – November 26, 1985) was an African-American surgical technician who helped develop the procedures used to treat blue baby syndrome in the 1940s. He was an assistant to Alfred Blalock at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and later at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Without any education past high school, Thomas rose above poverty and racism to become a cardiac surgery pioneer and a teacher to many of the country's most prominent surgeons

Early history

Vivien Thomas was born close to Lake Providence, Louisiana. The son of a carpenter, he attended Pearl High School (now known as Martin Luther King Magnet High School for Health Science and Engineering) in Nashville, Tennessee, in the 1920s. Even though it was part of a racially segregated system, the school provided him with a high-quality education. Later, when Thomas' savings were wiped out, he abandoned entirely his plans for college and medical school, relieved to have even a low-salary job as the Great Depression deepened.

Thomas showed an extraordinary aptitude for surgery and precise experimentation, which led Blalock to grant him more freedom in the execution of the procedures. Tutored in anatomy and physiology by Blalock and his young research fellow (Dr. Joseph Beard), Thomas rapidly mastered complex surgical techniques and research methodology. He and Blalock developed great respect for one another, forging such a close working relationship that they came to operate almost as a single mind. Outside the lab environment, however, they maintained the social distance dictated by the norms of the times. In an era when institutional racism was the norm, Thomas was classified, and paid, as a janitor, despite the fact that by the mid 1930s he was doing the work of a postdoctoral researcher in Blalock's lab

Unrecognized accomplishments

Thomas trained others in the Blue Baby procedure, as well as in a number of other cardiac techniques, including one he developed in 1946 for improving circulation in patients whose great vessels (the aorta and the pulmonary artery) were transposed. A complex operation called an atrial septectomy, the procedure was executed so flawlessly by Thomas that Blalock, upon examining the nearly undetectable suture line, was prompted to remark, "Vivien, this looks like something the Lord made."

The most common cause of "Blue Baby" (and hence the main surgery developed by Thomas and Blalock) was Tetralogy of Fallot [1] which combines 4 heart defects.

To the host of young surgeons Thomas trained during the 1940s, he became a figure of legend, the model of the dexterous and efficient cutting surgeon. "Even if you'd never seen surgery before, you could do it because Vivien made it look so simple," the renowned surgeon Denton

Cooley told *Washingtonian* magazine in 1989. "There wasn't a false move, not a wasted motion, when he operated." Surgeons like Cooley, along with Alex Haller, Frank Spencer, Rowena Spencer, and others credited Thomas with teaching them the surgical technique which placed them at the forefront of medicine in the United States. Despite the deep respect Thomas was accorded by these surgeons and by the many black lab technicians he trained at Hopkins, he was not well paid. He sometimes resorted to working as a bartender, often at Blalock's parties. This led to the peculiar circumstance of his serving drinks to people he had been teaching earlier in the day. Eventually, after negotiations in his behalf by Blalock, he became the highest paid technician at Johns Hopkins by 1946, and by far the highest paid African-American on the institution's rolls. Although Thomas never wrote or spoke publicly about his ongoing desire to return to college and obtain a medical degree, his widow, the late Clara Flanders Thomas, revealed in a 1987 interview with *Washingtonian* writer Katie McCabe that her husband had clung to the possibility of further education throughout the Blue Baby period and had only abandoned the idea with great reluctance. Mrs. Thomas stated that in 1947, Thomas had investigated the possibility of enrolling in college and pursuing his dream of becoming a doctor, but had been deterred by the inflexibility of Morgan State University, which refused to grant him credit for life experience and insisted that he fulfill the standard freshman requirements. Realizing that he would be 50 years old by the time he completed college and medical school, Thomas decided to give up the idea of further education.