

Why Grandma moved to New York

By Alexis Gines

Grandma lives in New York. She honks at bad drivers and purchases subway tokens. She travels with her sisters, and she can stand on her head for her yoga class. Grandma mails me packages that pour out potpourri smells from her home. My Grandma, Bernadine Coles Gines, was raised in Virginia, though. I rarely asked her about her childhood, her academic interest and why she moved to New York. I didn't know that when she arrived in New York, she was about to make history.

Gines loves the Internet. She scans pictures and emails them to me in minutes. While I'm chatting online a "hi" will pop up on my screen from Gines who, states away, is on the Net at the same time as I am. Gines welcomes the advancement of technology, learning about computers when she worked for the city. She also said that computers are far more efficient than the typewriters she had to use.

The typewriter would trigger her future interests though.

Born in 1926, Gines remembers playing office when she was about 7 years old with one of her younger sisters. Their grandfather gave them a portable typewriter.

“We liked playing with the typewriter and shuffling papers,” Gines said.

The oldest of three girls, Gines grew up in Charlottesville, Va., a college town home to the University of Virginia. There were children around the neighborhood, although many of them would have to go elsewhere for college when they grew up. That was too far into the future to think hard about though.

Gines remembers getting into mischief with her sisters.

“Once we made biscuits while she (Mother) was downtown and we left out the baking powder and those biscuits were hard as rocks,” Gines said. The dog wouldn’t even eat the biscuits to hide the evidence.

She also remembers the time she and her sister put their youngest sister in a drawer, and the dresser tipped over. The dresser fell against the wall instead of hitting the floor. Their youngest sister was uninjured.

“I don’t know why my mother left us alone...” Gines chuckled.

There were plenty of neighborhood children to play outside with too. “We used to play dodge ball in the middle of the street...” Gines said describing a typical summer morning. “In the afternoon we would have to take a bath and get dressed nicely and then we go out (again) and play.”

A board game competitor, Gines didn’t forget about her childhood when she became a grandmother. She sewed dresses for my Barbie dolls and played any game

when I visited her over the summer in New York. In middle school, I'd call her about math problems. She was good in math when she was in high school.

Gines also developed an interest in shorthand in high school. She put her math and shorthand skills together, remembering she enjoyed playing on a typewriter as a child. She decided she may want to do something in an office for a job. Of course, she was going to college first.

Gines knew since the fifth grade that she was going to go to college, even though she didn't know what college was. She just heard her family talk about when she was going to go to college. Education and hard work was ingrained in Gines and her sisters.

When Gines was preparing for college, she didn't want to be a dentist like her father because she didn't know any female dentists and she thought she might have to take biology, a subject she was not interested in. Gines did not want to be a teacher like her mother, because she didn't think she had the patience to handle children.

Not all of her peers were going to get the same education as Gines at the same time. She noticed a lot of the males were missing from college...the males she would have gone out with, males that made her think of marriage.

They were all at war after the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Meanwhile, Gines was becoming a business major. It sounded like an interesting subject when she heard about it from a friend who was attending Virginia State College, now Virginia State University, in Petersburg, Va.

Gines enrolled in Virginia State University and graduated with a business degree in 1946. The importance of education that her parents ingrained in her remained throughout college.

“We were taught to bring home good grades. If we brought home a low grade we had to explain why. In college I took a course in statistics and the first term I got a D and it made me so sick I went to the infirmary,” Gines said.

She wasn’t really sick. “I just felt bad and I wanted someone to take care of me,” she said. Her mother wasn’t fooled. She visited Gines as a surprise and let Gines stay in the hospital anyway.

When Gines was in college, her teacher suggested she should be an accountant. Her next step was to go to graduate school to get her M.B.A. in accounting in order to become a Certified Public Accountant (CPA).

She was also about to become the first black female in New York to become a CPA.

“I could not go to graduate school in my field in Virginia because Virginia was segregated,” Gines said.

The schools for blacks did not offer a master’s degree in business either.

Gines had always lived in a predominately black neighborhood. “We knew we went to a segregated school and we knew we sat on the back of the bus and we knew it was unfair, but it did not dominate our thinking as a child,” Gines said.

Although Virginia had a mandate that was supposed to provide equal education for all its citizens, Gines said Virginia would rather pay for a black student to go to colleges out of the state than integrate the white colleges.

So that’s why Grandma went to New York.

She stepped off the train at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station at Madison Square Garden in New York City in 1946. There was no need for Gines to be shocked by the big

buildings and large crowds because her friend met her at the station. New York would shock her later.

“I wanted to be a certified public accountant, and I knew I would not find a job in my field in Virginia,” Gines said.

Gines said she was not surprised that she would have to go outside of the state to get the education she wanted. She was also not surprised that even in New York, she would attend classes at New York University with mostly white men. She was a little surprised about the difficulties of finding a job she wanted, though.

In order to get a CPA certificate, Gines first needed three years experience working for a certified public accounting firm.

“I could find a job (in New York), but I couldn’t find a job working for a public accounting firm because they didn’t want to hire black people,” Gines said. “That never registered with me.”

The biggest slap in the face was when she heard about the only black accounting firm in New York...but they didn’t hire women.

Gines also experienced “culture shock” living in Harlem. A professor suggested she live there.

“I just never thought about seeing all black people and no white people,” Gines said. At least in Charlottesville, Va., she saw a mixture of people downtown, she said. In New York, “it almost felt more segregated.”

Gines befriended some people at the YWCA where she lived for three years, but she did not get to know many people.

“I never knew anybody who lived in the apartment building next door and I wasn’t sure I wanted to either because they were the people who hung out in the street at night...” Gines said. Sometimes she would walk to Seventh Avenue and eat ice cream at the drug stores. Gines would occasionally visit a nightclub to listen to jazz, but she didn’t have much money to go out often, Gines said. She spent much of her time in Harlem studying and looking for work. She took various jobs such as a bookkeeper for newspapers until she could find a job as a CPA.

Gines did not receive any responses to her applications for CPA jobs until she moved out of Harlem. “Before I got here I really kind of thought New York was colorblind and there wasn’t any bias or prejudice.”

Gines married and moved to Queens in 1949. Looking at her new address, it was harder for application reviewers to assume her race before calling her in on an interview, she said.

“And I thought New York was a liberal place.”

In Queens, Gines got a job at a Jewish accounting firm. She received her three years of CPA working experience in order to get her certificate.

“Queens reminded me more of home (in Virginia) because they had private houses and grass...” Gines said, who also enjoyed the cooler summers in Queens.

Gines said she worked in a nice environment too, though she admitted she must have taken the employees by surprise when she, a black woman, first showed up for the interview. After she got the job she looked through the files of other job applicants.

“It was no contest!” Gines said, remembering she still had to return to the firm at least twice for additional interviews before she was hired. “They didn’t need to think

about whether they were going to hire me against those other people that applied...but they gave it a long thought.”

Gines said she found out much later, in a book written by Theresa A. Hammond, that her difficulties of finding work in accounting were happening all over the place for blacks.

The University of North Carolina Press published Hammond’s book, A White-Collar Profession, African American Certified Public Accountants since 1921, in 2002.

Hammond wrote in the book that her goal was to record the stories of African Americans who “fought to join elite occupations in which they were not welcome.”

Gines was surprised that she would be part of a book. Her sister, Ruth Coles Harris, the same sister she played office with, is also in the book as the first black female CPA in Virginia.

Although many people recognized Gines for her accomplishments as a CPA, she spent most of her working life employed by the city. As a CPA, Gines was working 5 1/2 days of the week and sometimes overtime. After she married and had a son, she “needed something that wasn’t quite as demanding and went back to bookkeeping and then worked for the city.”

Gines had various jobs as a city employee n 1958, from working in the Bureau of Accounting, to being a sales tax auditor. “My jobs changed just enough to keep me from being bored...and I’ve always enjoyed them.”

When Gines was a sales tax auditor, a co-worker learned that some employees would be working with a computer in the Data Processing Department. The man, also a

part of a black city employees organization Gines was a part of, was upset that the people learning to work on the computer for the Data Processing Department were handpicked.

“...(He) felt that other city employees were being shortchanged by not being given a chance to work there...” Gines said. “And he would tell people in the (black city employees) organization that this is the wave of the future and people should be trying to get there (the Data Processing Department).”

The city later offered an aptitude test for the Data Processing Department instead of handpicking the employees. When Gines took the test in her department in 1960, she was the highest scorer. She moved to the Data Processing Department where she learned to program large scale computers. She worked in the Data Processing Department the longest in New York.

Gines remained around computers until the 90s because she had access to them at work. When she retired in 1991 though, she wanted a computer at home. She went back to NYU where she took a computer course that helped her learn about Windows 3.1. Her foundation at work contributed to her current computer hobbies and love of keeping in contact with people through the computer. “I read the New York Times, and when something comes up that I don’t feel too familiar with I promptly go and look it up,” she said.

Though retired, Gines has traveled for book signings of Hammond’s book on black CPAs, and has visited organizations and conventions, discussing her experiences as a CPA.

In October, Gines visited the Association of Hispanic and Black Business Students in New York University for a conference. She was the guest speaker at their luncheon and she received the Distinguished Alumni Award.

Gines enjoys traveling. Before her husband passed, they traveled through England, went to Mexico, and visited Jamaica, Canada and other places. She said she has done many of things she has always wanted to do, but would still like to visit more areas from South Africa to Japan.

One thing I enjoyed watching Gines do is draw. Yet Gines said, “It’s always something I always wished I could do but I’ve never been satisfied that it’s something I could do.” She still has paint, paper and crayons in her basement. Sometimes as a child, I asked her to draw with me, as I looked through her art supplies. I caught her drawing me instead of still objects in the room, as if she forgotten her camera and wanted a picture of me. My painting of a mountain was framed and used as a large refrigerator magnet for years.

Gines started taking yoga classes in her 40s. “I think I bought a book...because I used to just buy books that looked interesting,” she said, “and that was the first time I ever knew anything at all about Yoga.”

She read about a yoga class in a newspaper, and has been stretching and standing on her head ever since. Yoga is relaxing to her, she said.

Although Gines has various feeling about New York, the place she spent much of her adult life in, it is still a place where “almost anything you want to do you can do...” Gines said...even if the traffic is bad.

Now Gines volunteers with the AARP as a tax counselor.

“I feel like I need to give something back and that is something I can do,” Gines said. She also enjoys going to theatres, concerts, museums and stores...places she couldn't afford to go when she was looking for work in her 20s. On Saturday she went to the Lincoln Center to see a South African play called Nothing but the Truth.

Grandma lives in New York. She has enough pictures of me to wallpaper her hall. She reads my webpage, and is my roommate on family vacations. Grandma has dreams of losing her purse and forgetting her luggage. I tell her dreams about missing the bus. Frank Sinatra's voice comes out of Grandma's radio. Grandma makes casserole with cornbread crusts. When she visits we stand beside each other to see who is taller. She is 5 feet and 1 inch tall, she says. I think I am taller.