Acceptance speech by Dr. Eugene Grigsby at the ASU Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration breakfast, Jan. 19, 2010

First, let me thank Colleen Jennings Roggensack, Michelle Johnson, and the ASU MLK Committee for this award. More important thanks go to my late wife, Thomasena, whose January 16 birthdate is shared with MLK’s on the 15th. Although she left us a year ago, she was largely responsible for any achievements or contributions that I or our sons, Eugene or Marshall, have made. Recipients of rewards are usually asked, why you? Seeking details beyond those stated in the announcement. I too, have asked myself, why me for this award, which came as a surprise. I concluded that some forces were shaping my background, other than Tommy, that I had not considered until searching for what could have made me the subject of this award.

I love that this award is related to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom I never met but with whom I shared a number of important experiences. We both are graduates of Morehouse College, where many of mine and his attitudes, understandings, and concern for others, and the search for knowledge about education about life, as well as for the pursuit of happiness, were formed. Dr King attended Morehouse by design after finishing the Atlanta University Laboratory High School. I attended Morehouse by luck, after a threat of being lynched. It was in the middle of the Great Depression, in 1935. I had completed a year at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C., where no art was taught. I had been introduced to art by a stone mason, one of my newspaper customers who, when I went to collect early one morning I accidentally discovered was an artist. Walker Foster invited me to watch him paint, then after several weeks suggested that I try it myself.

There were no art classes offered at Smith, so I continued working with Walker Foster. I was still carrying papers but felt the need for more money and was lucky to get a job as a bus boy at a popular restaurant. Bus boys collected and washed dirty dishes while waitresses served meals. Bus boys could have dinner as part of their pay, but no dessert. Bus boys were black and waitresses were white. There was to be no communication between them. One waitress took pity on me and saw to it that I had apple pie or other desserts when served, although it was a "no no." I said something to her that she told other waitresses. One told the cook who beckoned me to the kitchen. To my surprise, when I arrived he called me a “Black Bastard," swung at me with the meat cleaver in his hand, and threatened to lynch me. I ran straight out into the dining room, out of the restaurant, and called my Dad who felt I needed to get out of town. He suggested I visit his sisters in Atlanta.

Luckily I had been corresponding with Gladys, a girl in Atlanta, a biology major at Spelman whom I had never met, but had promised to visit. Her letters were fascinating because of their interesting details. I was on a bus to Atlanta the next day, glad to tell Gladys I was coming. My aunts were glad to see me and made life comfortable. After a day, or two, Gladys took me to my first art exhibit held on Spelman’s campus where art was taught for the Atlanta University colleges Spelman and Morehouse, and the Lab high school. After looking at the art for a while a tall, handsome man came in and Gladys introduced me to Mr. Hale Woodruff, the art teacher.
I told him of my interest in art and my experience with Walker Foster, and that no art was taught at Smith. He suggested I transfer to Morehouse. I was not aware of Morehouse or of Spelman, where the exhibit was held, or that Spelman was a women’s school and Morehouse, next door, was a men’s school. I called my dad asking permission to transfer from J.C. Smith to Morehouse. Knowing I had gone to Atlanta to see Gladys, and that all the clothes I had taken were in a briefcase, he said, "Come home immediately." The next morning a telegraph informed me to "stay there until you hear from me." I knew my mother had intervened. A day or two later Dad came, bringing a change of clothes and other necessities for me to wear and use. It was a given that I would live with my aunt. I don’t know what arrangements dad made with his sisters to pay them for my room, board and other expenses. Now that I write about it, I don’t know what arrangements he made for my tuition and fees at Morehouse, since it was in the middle of the Great Depression.

The three years I spent at Morehouse were rich educationally and socially, but not much economically, although they prepared me to make a good living. They cancelled the difficult one at J.C. Smith and gave me a B average to enter graduate school Hale Woodruff introduced me to African art, and classical European and American art. I thrived as a major in art and a minor in drama, and graduated in 1938. Martin Luther King finished Morehouse 20 years later and my son Marshall, 30 years later. In 1967 King’s awards and my paintings were exhibited at Morehouse’s Centennial 100th year anniversary. At Morehouse we encountered many notable black artists, scientists, educators, musicians and ambassadors like Dantes Bel Garten, Haitian ambassador to the U.S. and scholars such as Dr W.E.B. DuBois, artists Hale Woodruff and sculptor Nancy Prophet. Arts related classes were taught on Spelman’s campus and those related to science on Morehouse’s campus.

In my senior year two of us art majors were asked to teach Woodruff’s high school art classes at the Lab High at Atlanta University. The principal, W.A. Robinson, later became principal of the Phoenix Carver High School and my reason to come to Phoenix. An example of Robinson’s influence on me came at Carver when I made a girl clean the dirty art room sink for punishment. Robinson called me in and criticized the punishment, saying what kind of attitude would the girl have about cleanup if it was related to punishment.

After graduating, Ms. Fagan, head of the University Education Department, offered to give me credit for student teaching based on my teaching of Woodruff’s classes at the Lab High. I refused for fear of being offered a teaching job; I didn’t want to teach. I wanted to go to art school. It was in the depression, and my folks were unable to send me to art school. My solution was to incorporate myself and sell shares that would be paid as prints or paintings after finishing art school. I left Atlanta enroute to New York and art school with $125 in my pocket, and I managed to attend the American Artist School, and to meet and associate with a number of artists working on the WPA Arts Project. I was 19, too young for the WPA, as one had to be 21. In order to survive I took many odd jobs like mopping floors, delivering books, even cooking hamburgers. At the second semester I told the dean of the art school I would have to drop out, and he gave me a scholarship to finish the year. At the end of the semester my dad told me that the state of North Carolina would pay all my expenses to a graduate school as long as it was not one in North Carolina. I chose Ohio State to pursue a
master’s degree. It was Woodruff’s influence that caused me to choose "the influence of African art on modern art" as my master’s thesis in 1940 and later in 1963 a study of African and Indian masks for my Ph.D. at NYU.

Martin Luther King and I were both mentored by W.A. Robinson, who was principal of the Atlanta University Laboratory High School where King attended before entering Morehouse and who became principal of Phoenix’s Carver High and was responsible for me going to Phoenix in 1946 to teach at Carver High.

Thank you