

KATE RAMSEYER: Hello, my name is Kate Ramseyer and this is the *Vox Insider*. Today, I'll be talking to Vox writer Mercy Austin about the process behind writing a story about Wynna Faye Tapp Elbert. Through decades of research, Elbert dedicated her life to preserving Black Columbian history. Take a listen.

RAMSEYER: Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement with the History feature that we have at Vox this month?

MERCY AUSTIN: I'm a journalism and history double major, so anything with the intersection of journalism and history, especially like the practice and dissemination of history, is really interesting to me. I've always seen them as two sides of the same coin, in the sense of like creating a repository of human stories. So I had mentioned to Jen and Laura our editors that I really wanted to see a history package for our feature this year, and I'd pitched an idea that was a little different, and they kind of took the idea and ran with it, and started to think about, okay, how can we commemorate important stories from Columbia and from the Columbia community? And so that kind of morphed into this vision of like, we're fighting for so much right now. We're seeing so much happening on local, state and federal levels. How can we commemorate the people who have fought for these issues in the past, and kind of have a tribute to the conversations that are ongoing and are not new, even if they might feel new.

RAMSEYER: So could you tell me a little bit about the process of writing and interviewing everyone?

AUSTIN: So I had heard of Buena Fauci top Albert because I've covered a number of issues in Columbia related to the African American Heritage Trail, the blind Boon home, and a lot of the efforts that have been happening over the past few decades to preserve black history in Columbia. And she really was the foundational base of that. So she's a name that I had heard a lot from a lot of different people, and so I was really excited when I had the opportunity to get to cover her, and I kind of reached out to some of my contacts on those previous stories that I'd written. Just said, Hey, can you help me get to the bottom of who knew her, who would be a good person to talk to you? And it was actually the Boone County Historical Society that put me in contact with her family members. And that was really a really wonderful conversation. It lasted, like, probably, like an hour and a half that we just talked. And they were sharing so many stories and anecdotes, so I ended up having to, like, really cool it down. But it was, it was really magical. I think it was the kind of story where you just have so much information about a person and you know that you're not going to be able to even begin to scratch the surface of the legacy that they left in the city. But I decided to focus on the history aspect of the work that she did as kind of a way of carrying on the thread and also thinking about issues that are still incredibly relevant today.

RAMSEYER: What were your expectations when you were going into writing this story?

AUSTIN: I think I came at it knowing that I wanted to do something with the history angle, and then I was just floored by the sheer amount of what she did and what she was involved in. I mean, I remember telling Jen, my editor, I said I could fill this entire article with just a bullet pointed list of like the things that she did in Columbia. So Winifrey is just truly an incredible local figure who did so much. But I did end up coming back to that history angle because of that kind of tie to one. I think, I think it threads together a lot of what she did, because I think a lot of what she did was focused on black culture, black pride and black community in Columbia and history is kind of the thread that ties all of those together in the sense of really bringing together communities over shared past and shared experiences.

RAMSEYER: How did your past experience writing about local history inform the work that you did for this piece?

AUSTIN: I have always been very fascinated by the history of the spaces that I'm in. Like this summer, I'm gonna be working with the Rock Island Heritage Trail, which is like a rail to trail system, kind of like what the Katy Trail is, and they're building it. And it's like, gonna be like, kind of parallel to it spanning across the state of Missouri. So I'll be, like, traveling to different towns and writing up historical descriptions for, like, a Clio tour, which is an app that allows you to, like, go on, basically, tours of historic heritage sites. So I've done a number of different projects like that are kind of what's what's interesting to me is things that will allow me to capture local history and tell these stories that are very personal and very present and here. So that's definitely something that influenced my approach.

RAMSEYER: Is there anything else that you wanted to talk to me about, just about your process about your passion for doing this kind of writing?

AUSTIN: I think the fact that Vox is kind of building this platform where we're saying these stories matter, preserving these stories matter, sharing these stories matter, talking about these stories is so so critically important, and it's also a way of of standing up for their importance. Do. In a space where that is not always like treated as a priority

RAMSEYER: That was Mercy Austin on this episode of the Vox Insider. The article we discussed today is live now on Vox Magazine dot com. Make sure to check it out, and keep tuning in to Vox Insider.