

Local Politics Matter

The Baltimore of My Youth

A Bygone Time



My earliest memories date back to 1957 when I was not quite three years old. My family had moved to a middleclass neighborhood in northeast Baltimore that was in transition. Black families were moving in and White families were taking flight. It was a good neighborhood of brick rowhouses with hedge trimmed front lawns and covered porches. There were fenced back yards, many with fruit trees, flower gardens and hibiscus bushes. There were also wide clean allies that seemed enormous to a small child. It was a safe neighborhood, no drugs and no guns just lots of children with parents pursuing the American dream.

Most of these families were once or twice removed from the southern migration. They came for the jobs, the better life. There were plenty of good paying jobs in those days. My family and my neighbors were employed in a myriad of professions. They worked for the government (city, state, and feder-

al), They worked in local manufacturing plants like Bethlehem Steel, GM and Westinghouse, breweries like, National Bohemian, they taught at neighborhood schools, they were janitors, bus drivers, tailors, seamstresses, barbers and beauticians. Some of the women worked, but many were homemakers.

When our parents attended high school, there were three public high schools that Blacks could attend in Baltimore City. One was in east Baltimore (Dunbar), one was in west Baltimore (Fredrick Douglas) and the other was a vocational school (Carver). As a result, many of the adults who grew up in the city knew each other. By the time I was school aged things had changed. My brothers and I went to the local catholic school as did many of the other children in the neighborhood. Only a handful of White families remained in our immediate community which was to the north and east of the school. However,

there were still white families in the neighborhoods to the south and east of the school. The school was about a 15-block walk from our home and served both communities. We all played together at school and returned to our communities at the end of the day. This was the norm for us; however, it was different for my friends who attended schools located in White communities. Their commute to school could be filled with drama and anxiety. When they chose to spend their bus fare on things other than transportation, they had to walk through White communities where they weren't welcome and were often threatened. They would face these commutes with trepidation, making the trek from their safe communities to what could be considered enemy territory.

Everyone knew the risk of entering these neighborhoods on foot, so they would travel in groups to reduce the probability of confrontations. Both Whites and Blacks respected the invisible boundary lines and treaded softly when crossing them.

This was our world, a world of house parties (we called them hops), good friends and extended families within walking distance or under the same roof. Depending on your resources, you would either walk or ride public transportation to the movies, or downtown. We played games like four square, blocks, dodge ball, red line and hop scotch in the allies. When there were disagreements, people settled them with words or with their fists. It was all very normal. We were young and full of dreams, planning for our futures whether in college, working for the government or working in the many plants and breweries

that were a part of the fabric of the community.

By the time I entered high school, things began to change. Two of the older boys had been drafted into the military. This was during the Vietnam era. When they returned to the neighborhood, they introduced their peers to drugs (marijuana and heroin). It was slow to take hold, but once it did, there were few families that were untouched by it. Strangely it didn't bring the violence that's normally associated with drugs, but it brought death in mass first through overdoses and later through AIDS.

Those families who had the resources to move left. You see, they thought they could save their children and escape the drug epidemic that was taking hold of the neighborhood. Unfortunately, the same ties that bound us all together, pulled many of their children back regardless of where they lived.

The violence that engulfs many of the Baltimore communities today is an anathema to me. We policed ourselves and cleaned our streets. We went to school, worked, played and took care of our home, ourselves, our families and our friends. If you drive through the four by eight block area that surround my childhood home, they still look good. The fruit trees and hibiscus are long gone. Many of the families that lived there when I was growing up have moved on, but it still looks like a community to be proud of.

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