

THE LONG MARCH TO FREEDOM



Fifty years later,
200 nights of open housing marches
still resonate in Milwaukee



Acknowledgments

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To view the series online, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/index.php>

Introduction

By Dr. Daniel J. Bergen

Executive Director of the Office of Community Engagement, Marquette University

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Director of the Center for Urban Research, Teaching & Outreach, Marquette University

In 1967, Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council initiated 200 nights of marches and direct action to demand fair and open housing for black residents. This awe-inspiring movement led to the passing of fair housing policies locally, and would be instrumental in the passing of federal fair housing policy of the late 1960s. Radicalized by its youth security force called the Commandos, the NAACP Youth Council engineered a herculean undertaking. Their determination, tactical ingenuity and sheer bravery in the face of violent opposition inspired the leading historian of Milwaukee's Youth Council, Dr. Erica Metcalfe (a Milwaukee native), to call it "the best in the country."



Dr. Robert S. Smith

In the pages that follow, staff reporters of Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service and Marquette University journalism students revisit that remarkable moment in the city's civil rights history. The reporters engage activists from the era, and contemporary voices, to honor the 50th anniversary of the marches, and to contextualize a history that remains so critical to understanding the doggedness of the racial disparities we face as a city today.

This collection is a reminder of the importance of meaningful journalism in an era where "truth" has become a negotiable and elusive ideal. The collection is also a reminder of the importance of engaging grassroots voices in that examination and preservation of the very "truth"

under attack today.

The stories gathered here are the printed versions included in the multimedia series, "Milwaukee Open Housing Marches: 50th Anniversary," which is replete with images and videos that add dynamism to this richly historical yet timely celebration.

Beyond capturing a critical narrative from a variety of compelling perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that the collection represents the impact of intentional community-university partnerships. Throughout many of these pages, community members serve as educators in their interviews, offering time and wisdom to student journalists, and providing a lived experience that is impossible to glean from the stark pages of a text within the four walls of a classroom. It is the raw anger, the vulnerable tears, the persistent hope and the unadulterated passion of the human experience generously provided by each interviewee that honors the past, while conferring wisdom on a future generation. As readers, we are privileged to gain access to this intimate moment between educator and student.

Fifty years ago, members of the Milwaukee community marched in pursuit of justice. This collection captures the steady beat of footsteps as a rhythm for the pursuit. It is a beat that resounded throughout our city during the civil rights movement, and continues to reverberate today. Marquette University's mission calls us to "faith in service, and the active pursuit of justice" — we are grateful for the faith of those who marched, and continue to march, persistent in their pursuit of justice.

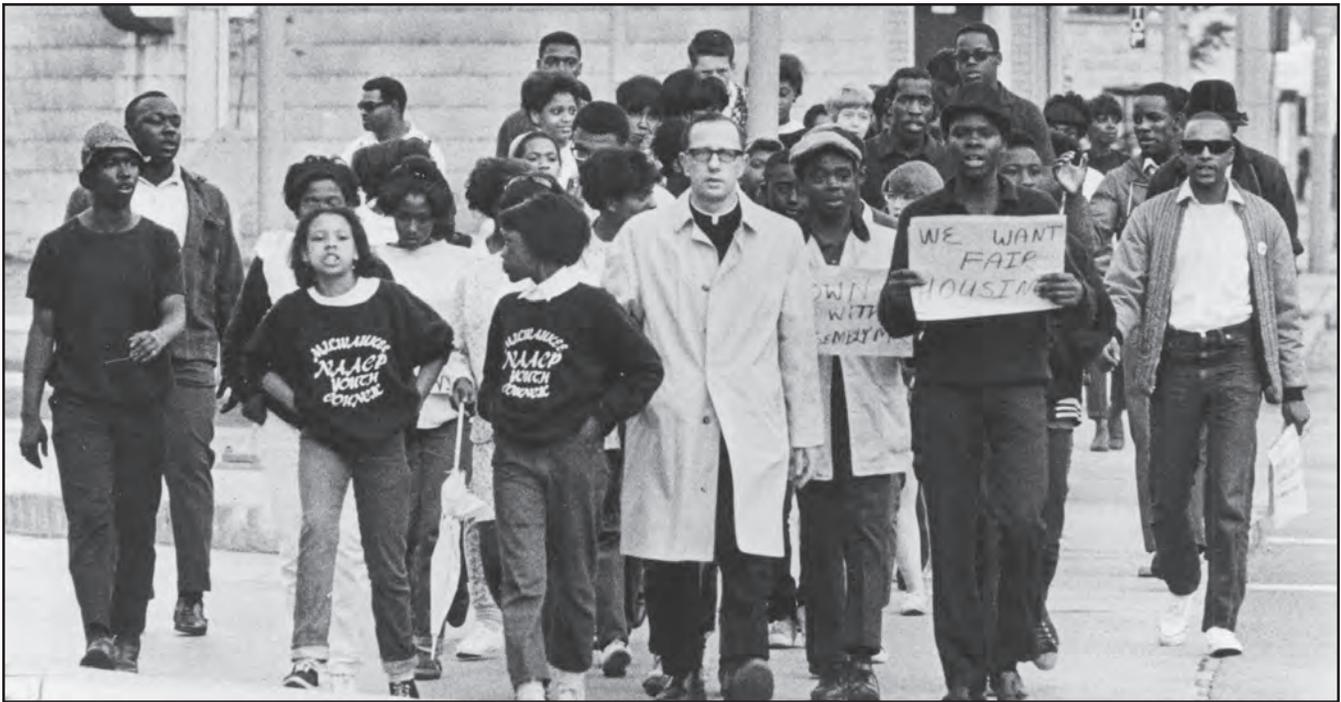


Dr. Daniel J. Bergen

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Father James Groppi and members of the NAACP Youth Council march in support of Vel Phillips' open housing bill. (Photo courtesy of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and Historic Photo Collection, Milwaukee Public Library)

Open housing marches placed spotlight on racial discrimination, segregation

By Andrea Waxman

On Aug. 28 and 29, 1967, civil rights marchers from Milwaukee's largely African-American North Side crossed the 16th Street Viaduct en route to Kosciuszko Park on the city's predominantly white South Side.

Led by the Rev. James Groppi, advisor of the NAACP Youth Council, and its Commando security unit, 200 council members and supporters marched to protest housing discrimination.

On the first night, the protesters were met by thousands of hostile white counter-protesters at the south end of the bridge. Five thousand counter-protesters, waving signs bearing racist epithets and jeering, followed the marchers to the park and shouted them down. On the march back, the white mob threw stones and bottles.

"We nearly got killed there last night," said Groppi, a white Catholic priest, in a televised press conference the next day.

Announcing that the Youth Council would march again that night, Groppi said, "We have tried every means possible to bring fair housing legislation to the city of Milwaukee and we're going to continue to march. ... We're going to exercise (our constitutional right of freedom of speech) regardless of ... the danger. We'll die for that right."

The turnout on both sides swelled on the second night with

counter-protesters numbering 13,000, according to news reports. The protesters were spat on and called names and counter-protesters threw "bricks, bottles and anything they could get their hands on," said council member Mary Arms, in a recorded account.

"By the time the marchers (returned to) the safety of the viaduct, they looked like refugees from a battle. ... Some could not walk and had to be carried by other marchers," wrote *Milwaukee Journal* reporter Frank Aukofer in his book about the local movement, "City With a Chance."

Shortly after the Youth Council's return to the NAACP headquarters at Freedom House, 1316 N. 15th St., tear gas and bullets from police rifles engulfed the area and the house, setting it on fire. Those inside escaped but the building burned down. Police said they were responding to reports of a sniper, a claim Groppi and the Youth Council disputed.

Mayor Henry Maier called for a voluntary curfew and prohibited night marches for 30 days. Instead of marching, the council held a rally in front of the Freedom House ruins the next evening, but police ruled the gathering illegal and arrested more than 50 people. Council members decided that if they were going to be arrested anyway, they might as well march.

Groppi, the Youth Council and their supporters ended their protests for open housing on March 14, 1968. "Demonstrations, in the form of marches and rallies, had continued for 200

consecutive days since that first tense walk to Kosciuszko Park on Aug. 28, 1967,” wrote Aukofer. Open housing laws had been passed in 17 communities but would not pass in the city of Milwaukee for another month and a half.

Three weeks later, on April 4, as the Youth Council considered how to proceed, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and the nation erupted in grief and violence.

Choosing to honor King’s commitment to non-violence, the Commandos and Groppi organized a march through downtown Milwaukee that culminated in a rally on the North Side. “Over 15,000 people joined in that march, the largest in the city’s history and one of the nation’s largest memorial demonstrations for King,” wrote Groppi’s widow and Youth Council member Margaret Rozga.

Growing frustration

Tensions in Milwaukee had been growing throughout the early 1960s. Activists had taken on the issue of school desegregation with the city’s first major civil rights demonstration, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), in 1963. The following year, African-American attorney Lloyd Barbee brought more than a dozen civil rights, political, labor, religious and social groups together to form the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) to fight segregation in the public schools, including a large-scale boycott of black schools. In 1965, Barbee filed a federal lawsuit against Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

The Youth Council began its first big civil rights campaign in February 1966 when it picketed the whites-only Eagles Club and some of its members’ homes.

Frustration with the lack of civil rights progress in the African-American community, and fear and anger among whites continued to escalate in the summers of 1966 and 1967.

In addition, Milwaukee’s black youth were hearing the call of the nascent black power movement, popularized nationally

by leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which spoke of black dignity and self-determination.

On Aug. 9, 1966, Ku Klux Klan members threw a bomb into Freedom House, the NAACP headquarters then located at 2026 N. Fifth St. The incident caused minimal physical damage but raised concerns about threats to members’ safety.

Spurred by distrust of the police, the Youth Council’s direct action committee had formed the Commandos in 1966, a security force committed to protecting marchers without provoking violence.

“Once the Commandos got involved with direct action . . . they managed to . . . dramatize this issue of open housing. It placed the spotlight on segregation in the city for the first time,” said Erica Metcalfe, a history professor at Texas Southern University, who conducted research on the Milwaukee Marches at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM).

Calling the Youth Council “the best in the country,” Metcalfe added, “It stood out as one of the most active and (many of its members) were just high school kids.” Most of the Commandos were in their mid-20s, she said.

On July 30, 1967, just weeks after riots raged in Newark and Detroit, disorder broke out on Milwaukee’s North Side and spread downtown. Sparked by a confrontation between police and a crowd of black citizens outside a nightclub, looting, gunshots and arson reigned for two nights. There were four deaths, hundreds of injuries and more than 1,000 arrests, prompting Mayor Henry Maier to call up the National Guard. He imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew that lasted for more than a week.

Housing conditions

According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin’s African-American population increased by nearly 600 percent in the decades prior to the marches, from 12,158 in 1940 to 74,546 in 1960. Urban renewal efforts started after World War II had taken a toll on African-American neighborhoods and housing. The destruction of many older homes and the clearing of a wide

swath to build Interstate Highway 43 put particular stress on housing availability. Redlining, restrictive covenants, block busting, predatory lending and insurance practices all contributed to the problem.

Alderwoman Vel Phillips had led the charge to end housing discrimination when she introduced a bill in the Milwaukee Common Council that would outlaw housing discrimination in 1962. The council failed to pass it then and all three times she re-introduced it between 1963 and 1967. Phillips cast the only vote for the bill every time.

In late 1966, Groppi informed the Youth Council that black Viet Nam war veteran Robert Britton had reported that



Open housing demonstrators gather at St. Boniface Church. (Photo courtesy of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and Historic Photo Collection, Milwaukee Public Library)

he and his family were barred from renting an apartment at 29th and Burleigh streets on the basis of race.

The council then joined forces with Phillips to support a citywide open housing ordinance.

The viciousness of the counter-protesters was a critical component of the marches, said UWM history professor Robert Smith. “[The counter-protesters] thought about how to be offensive. They thought about how to create the most hostile environment both in terms of their speech . . . and their actions and also in their physical violence,” said Smith, who noted that this behavior was not punished.

Smith added that powerful expressions of resistance on the part of counter-protestors generally embolden and reaffirm those who are demanding fair treatment.

“Even in the face of physical violence, and death and maybe losing jobs . . . those hostile responses in many cases lead the protestors to find a level of resolve — and this is where marching and singing and prayer come into play — a place of peace in which they no longer fear what will happen,” Smith said.

Former Commando Fred Reed agreed that as insults and injuries to marchers increased, the number of participants grew.

Smith also pointed to a unique convergence of forces in

Milwaukee that shaped events. “That particular moment in the history of the city’s longstanding set of campaigns for equality is . . . an interesting merger of traditional civil rights activism that we associate with the South and a much more radical, boisterous expression that we associate with the North.”

The talents of leaders such as Phillips, Barbee, Groppi, the Commandos and others led to “intersecting approaches to advancing a civil rights agenda that came together very beautifully in Milwaukee,” Smith said.

“You need the exuberance and the invincibility of youth to dare the status quo to change,” he added.

On April 11, a week after King’s assassination, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which included the Fair Housing Act. On April 30, with seven newly elected members, the Common Council passed an even more comprehensive open housing ordinance by a vote of 15 to four.

It took another eight years for Barbee to win the federal case for school desegregation.

Although these laws brought improvements after more than a century of racial discrimination, 50 years later, Milwaukee remains one of the nation’s most segregated cities, in both housing and schools. ■

Civil rights in the U.S.

By Andrea Waxman

The civil rights movement is widely seen as dating from 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

However, early equal rights organizations emerged in the late 1800s and the still-active NAACP and National Urban League were established in the early 1900s.

Black World War I veterans returned from abroad with a newfound sense of their rights and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s built black solidarity and self-respect. But African-Americans gained few civil rights in the first half of the 20th century.

School desegregation proceeded at a snail’s pace after *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Then, civil rights icon Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955 sparked a chain of protests throughout the South, as well as legislation outlawing segregated public transportation.

In August 1963, more than a quarter of a million people participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.

In one of the most important and wide-ranging legisla-

tive gains since Reconstruction, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, outlawing discrimination of many kinds based on race, color, religion or national origin.

For the next two years, the movement was dominated by efforts to obtain voting rights for citizens in the South where literacy tests and poll taxes had been used to disenfranchise African-Americans and other non-whites. On Aug. 6, 1965, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, ending those practices, although other obstacles such as voter ID laws continue to serve the same purpose, according to civil rights groups.

Days later, riots broke out in Watts, an impoverished African-American neighborhood in Los Angeles. An official investigation “found that the riot was a result of the Watts community’s longstanding grievances and growing discontentment with high unemployment rates, substandard housing, and inadequate schools,” according to the Civil Rights Digital Library. The Watts riots “jolted (Dr. King) awake to the struggles faced by urban blacks outside the South,” wrote *Chicago Magazine*.

In 1966, King brought his civil rights campaign north to Chicago, where he led a series of open housing protests in white neighborhoods.

During “the long, hot summer” of 1967, urban uprisings occurred in 159 U.S. cities. ■



High school sweethearts recall open housing struggle

By Rebecca Carballo

Sixteen-year-old Joyce Wigley walked out of St. Boniface Catholic Church with a large group of teens in the summer of 1967. When they stepped out of the building their eyes began to burn, and they couldn't see.

White people were throwing tear gas from the other side of a fence, a few feet away from the church.

This was the first time Wigley was tear gassed, but it wouldn't be the last.

She and the other teens were participating in the marches to protest housing discrimination in Milwaukee with the NAACP Youth Council, led by the Rev. James Groppi.

It was at a Youth Council meeting in the basement of St. Boniface where Wigley met Ken McGhee, the man who would become her husband. After graduating from high school they were married in that very church.

Fifty years later, the McGhees vividly remember one particular day when they marched across the 16th Street Viaduct.

Once they reached the end of the bridge, chaos ensued.

Ken McGhee recalls being surrounded by an angry white mob. They pelted eggs, broken glass and rocks at the young marchers.

"I was hit on the leg with either glass or a rock, and it drew blood."

"Anything they could throw, they threw," Joyce McGhee said. "I was hit on the leg with either glass or a rock, and it drew blood."

The police threw tear gas at the marchers, forcing them to run in the direction of the counter-protesters, Ken McGhee said. When the two groups came together, fighting ensued.

"That will always be on my heart — just how hateful that really was," said Joyce McGhee.

Despite the violence that occurred, the McGhees remained committed. They showed up at the picket line every day after



Joyce and Ken McGhee.

the 16th Street bridge incident.

Ken McGhee said he still feels the effects from the marching he did in his youth. “My bones still hurt today. Some of the aches and pains we’re having in our 60s and 50s is kind of attributed to all the marching we did as a kid.”

For both the McGhees and Wigleys the marches were a family affair. Wigley went with her cousins and her younger brother, Chuck. At 8 years old, he was the youngest member of the Youth Council.

Ken McGhee’s older brother, Lee, was the Youth Council president. “For many years I was called ‘Lee’s brother,’” he said.

His parents were very supportive of his involvement in the Youth Council. They would often prepare meals for the marchers. However, he can recall one instance when they weren’t happy with the organization.

“The only time they were upset is when my brother and I went to jail the same night,” McGhee said with a chuckle.

That night, he went out with the Youth Council to picket the Fraternal Order of Eagles Club, an exclusively white social

Today, the McGhees still live on the North Side, in what they describe as a racially diverse neighborhood. They say they would “never dream of leaving.”

club where a musical group was supposed to be performing. A large group of protesters and patrons began to form in front of the club. When a band member opened his car door, he hit a protester in the back, and she screamed. “When she screamed all hell broke loose,” Ken McGhee said.

Everyone began pushing and shoving. Police flooded the area. They began making arrests and hitting people in the unruly crowd with billy clubs.

“I was told I was hit several times, but things were moving so fast I don’t remember,” Ken McGhee said. During the chaos, he was arrested. When he was loaded into the paddy wagon his brother was already there in handcuffs.

Joyce McGhee said she and other Youth Council members were shunned by other students at the mostly black Rufus



Joyce McGhee said some of her Rufus King High School peers were afraid to be associated with the movement.

King High School. She said some of her peers were afraid to be associated with the movement.

“Now they’ll lie and say they were a part of it, and that they marched every day,” Ken McGhee said. “We know who marched every day because we did.”

Today, the McGhees still live on the North Side, in what they describe as a racially diverse neighborhood. They say they would “never dream of leaving.”

Ken McGhee said the open housing movement allowed many professionals to move out of his neighborhood. He recalls growing up with black police officers, doctors and attorneys living down the street from him.

“When open housing came they started to move to suburbs like Brown Deer and Sussex because they thought they had arrived,” he said. “We lost a lot of good role models in our community.”

Joyce McGhee, who retired from AT&T, and Ken McGhee, who retired from General Motors, are among the role models who remained.

“We want to show you don’t have to leave where you came from to be successful,” Ken McGhee said. ■

To view a video interview with Joyce McGhee, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/high-school-sweethearts-recall-open-housing-struggle.php>



Nazis march along 16th St. at Forest Home on Sept. 23, 1967. (Photo courtesy of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and Milwaukee Public Library)

Counter-protesters driven by fear, hatred, white residents recall

By Dean Bibens

Gas Ricca recalls 1967 as a frightening time for everyone in Milwaukee, not just for African-Americans who faced down white protesters as they marched for open housing.

Now 72, Ricca graduated from Hurley High School in 1963 and moved to Milwaukee in 1964 looking for a job, just a few years before the marches began. He was living on 24th Street and Kilbourn Avenue, near the Eagles Club, an all-white fraternal organization complete with workout areas and a dance hall. The club was a frequent counter-protest location and a haven for many racist bigots, Ricca said.

"I saw demonstrations take place at the Eagles Club and, to be quite frank, it was frightening," said Ricca, a former factory worker at Falk Corp., 3001 W. Canal St.

"I didn't join in on the counter-protests," he added, "because I hadn't really chosen a side in the issue. But looking back on it, sitting out of it was just as bad as being a part of the (counter) demonstrations."

Many white residents felt as though they were trapped, Ricca said, because if they spoke up for African-Americans, they would be shunned in their communities.

"A lot of whites were worried about their house prices dropping with African-Americans making their way into the area," he said. "African-Americans made their presence felt immediately and a lot of whites just weren't connected with the issue."

Ricca said many were also fearful because African-Americans were standing up to racism and whites were not ready for change.

"Malcolm X was a leader that I read about a lot, and I think he definitely put the fear of God into a lot of people," he said of the civil rights leader, who was slain in New York in 1965. "You knew that he wasn't going to back down, and neither were the African-American people; they had a real reason to fight."

Ricca added that "whites were fearful that they would fall into the minority," and that "people in general don't like change, in my opinion, because it almost makes them feel like

"There was an open wound in the sense that the African-American community felt left out 50 years ago. And today, most of the poverty that we have seen over the years is driven by that very racial divide."

they can be at a disadvantage.”

At the time, Ricca’s friend Kenneth Germanson lived in an all-white area on the city’s South Side, just north of General Mitchell International Airport. Germanson, now 88, witnessed the resistance as a *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter.

“I had neighbors who would chant racist slurs — and a favorite of theirs was, ‘E-I, E-I, E-I, O, Father Groppi’s got to go,’” Germanson said, referring to the famed white priest who helped lead the marches. “I was not involved in the marches at all, but there were times where I was a coward, and didn’t stand up for African-Americans being heckled by my racist neighbors.”

Germanson, who has lived in the Town of Lake for 53 years, remembers once arriving at his house and being greeted with a racist remark by a neighbor: “Welcome to our neighborhood – the last bastion of whites.”

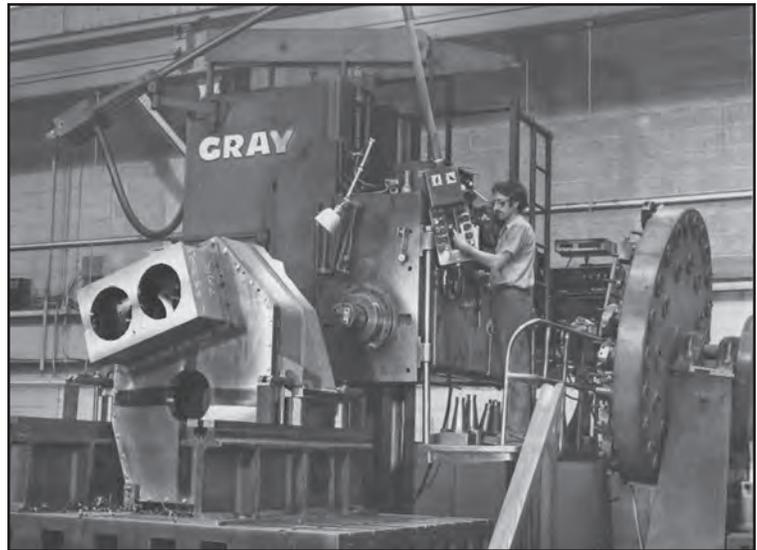
In that moment, Germanson said, he took “the coward’s way out” and didn’t stand up to him. Today, he points out, there are signs around the community that say, “All people are welcome, regardless of where they came from.”

Even so, he believes that racism still exists in Milwaukee, mostly because “people don’t have the courage to stand up for each other.”

Ricca offered another reason why discrimination still exists.

“I know a lot of my friends’ parents were military families and they had different beliefs than others,” he said. “Racist sentiments have been passed down to families for years — and it’s just not right.”

Rocky Marcoux, commissioner of the Milwaukee Department of City Development, has lived in the city since graduating from Marquette University in the 1970s. He said he believes that race relations have significantly improved in the city, but there is still a long way to go.



Gus Ricca was a factory worker at Falk Corp. (Photo courtesy of Gus Ricca)

“There was an open wound in the sense that the African-American community felt left out 50 years ago,” Marcoux said, “and today, most of the poverty that we have seen over the years is driven by that very racial divide.”

The commissioner added: “The racial issues are real in this city, and it’s evident in where the white population has gone since the housing marches. Many have fled to suburban areas in Milwaukee County and beyond.”

Germanson said “a majority of the whites” who lived on the South Side 50 years ago moved to the suburbs to “get away from it all.”

Whatever their reasons, Germanson said, “they were magnified by the hatred.” Looking back on it now, he added, “I don’t think anything justified the hatred that was shown.” ■

To view a video interview with Kenneth Germanson, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/counter-protestors-driven-by-fear-hatred-white-residents-recall.php>

Former St. Boniface student says Father Groppi 'taught me how to love'

By Carly Wolf

Shirley (Berry) Butler-Derge met the Rev. James E. Groppi when she was only 8 years old. According to Butler-Derge, she and several students at St. Boniface Catholic School instantly fell in love with the young, white priest who came to their school to teach catechism.

He was different. "He made it real," Butler-Derge said.

Groppi, having marched with civil rights leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the South, taught the St. Boniface students about black history, a subject that had been largely ignored by their school curriculum. Most of the students were African-American.

"He started talking to us about black people who had contributed to history," Butler-Derge said. "He was the one who told us about Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Crispus Attucks."

Learning about important black figures in history sparked Butler-Derge's passion for education. "Why aren't these people in our history books?" she began to ask as a middle schooler.

Butler-Derge was elected secretary of education at the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council when she was only 13 years old.

"Father Groppi was the kind of person that didn't look down on children," Butler-Derge said. "His eyes would just light up like stars. He loved for you to express how you were feeling about anything."

The Youth Council, a collective of about 15 young people, would lead the historic open housing marches in Milwaukee that lasted for 200 days in 1967 and 1968. The Youth Council and Groppi fought to end the racist rules surrounding housing.

The protestors were frequently met with strong oppo-

sition, especially on the South Side. According to Butler-Derge, people opposed to the protest threw rocks, glass, bottles and other objects at them.

"I remember Father Groppi got hit with a big rock," Butler-Derge recalls. "Blood just came all down his face, but it didn't faze him at all. He just kept marching."

Groppi's mission was not only to address big-picture issues such as fair housing. He was also passionate about individuals.

Butler-Derge recalls the time she came to a greater understanding of American slavery. Enraged, she decided that she was not going to have anything to do with anything white. She wore no white tennis shoes, no white t-shirts and spoke to no white people.

This included Groppi.

"For a whole week, I was not going to speak to him because he was white," Butler-Derge recalled. "He would look at me with the kindest eyes. He knew what was going on and he kept loving me."

Her boycott didn't last long.

"Everything really goes back to Father Groppi because he really taught me how to love," Butler-Derge said.

Breaking down racial barriers in a racially divided city, he became a symbol for equality and love.

To this day, Butler-Derge is thankful for the impact Groppi made on the city. She credits him with planting the seed that led her to become an award-winning teacher at Milwaukee Public Schools and parochial schools in the Milwaukee area.

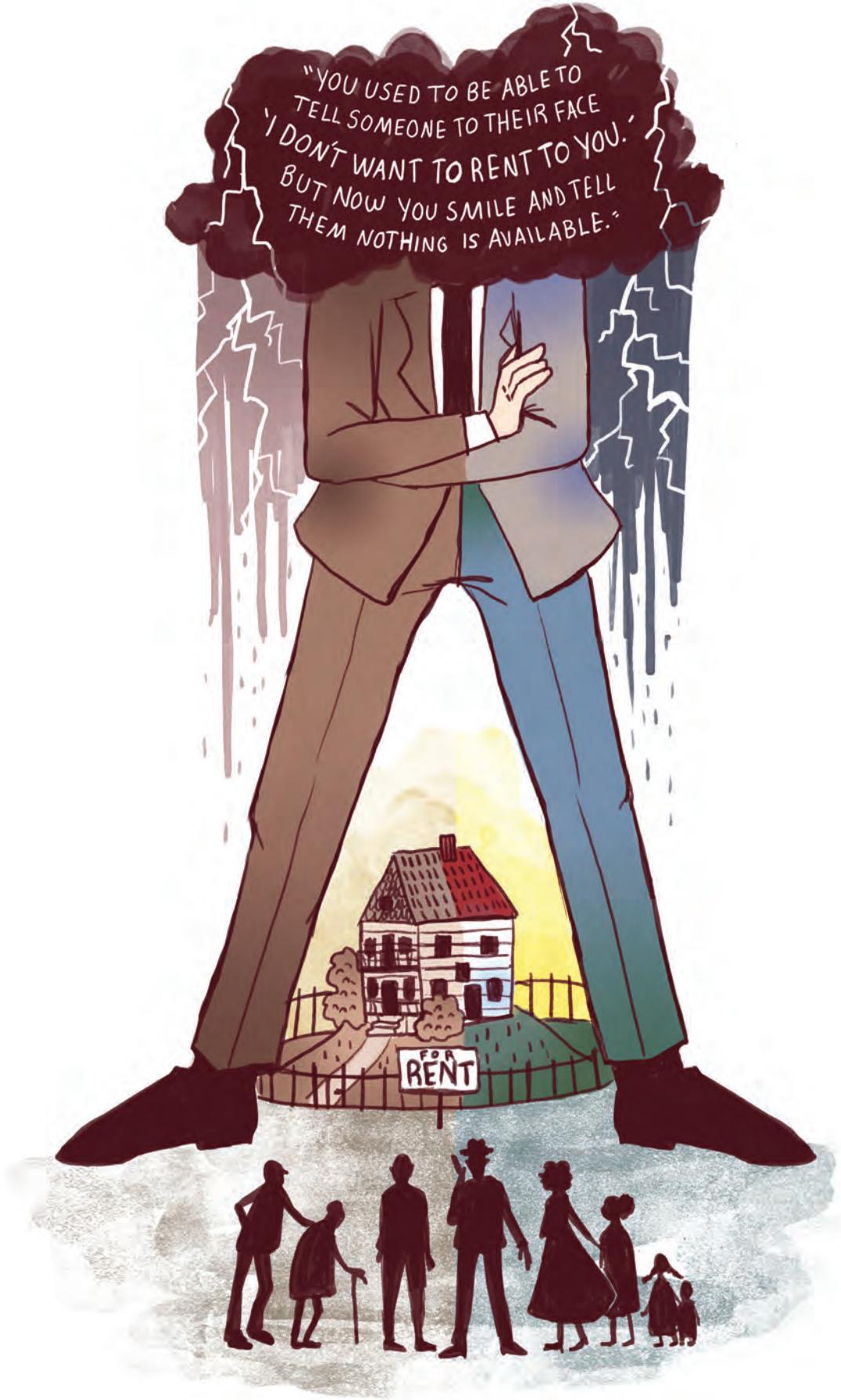
In 2013, Butler-Derge authored "Asante Sana, 'Thank You' Father James E. Groppi" to honor Groppi and the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council. ■

To view a video interview with Shirley Butler-Derge, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/former-st-boniface-student-says-father-groppi-taught-me-how-to-love.php>



Shirley Butler-Derge with the book she wrote to honor Father James Groppi.

"YOU USED TO BE ABLE TO
TELL SOMEONE TO THEIR FACE
'I DON'T WANT TO RENT TO YOU.'
BUT NOW YOU SMILE AND TELL
THEM NOTHING IS AVAILABLE."





Oscar Manuel (left), 46, and his brother Roosevelt Manuel, 43, have lived on Milwaukee's North Side their entire lives. (Photo by Edgar Mendez)

Fifty years after open housing marches, residential segregation still norm in Milwaukee

By Edgar Mendez

For 200 consecutive days, advocates including Vel Phillips, the Rev. James Groppi, the NAACP Youth Council and hundreds of African-American residents led a push for open housing that took marchers north to south, across the 16th Street Viaduct and onto what is now known as Cesar E. Chavez Drive. August 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of Milwaukee's Open Housing Marches, which sparked the passage of a municipal open housing law — one with more teeth than the federal and state laws in place at the time — and along with it the promise that the city's housing would one day be integrated.

That hope is stale now, as Milwaukee continues to hover at or near the top of lists that measure residential segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas. That won't surprise most Milwaukeeans, who've grown accustomed to neighborhoods nearly void of black/white diversity.

"The only time you see Caucasians in the neighborhood is when they're riding through in their cars," said Roosevelt Manuel, 43.

Manuel, who works in construction, lives on North 17th

Street in the 53206 ZIP code. According to 2011-15 estimates from the American Community Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the 53206 ZIP code has 25,179 African-American residents and 632 whites.

While African-Americans have, in increasing numbers, moved to the near South Side neighborhoods that activists marched into 50 years ago, those neighborhoods are no longer white; they have been populated mainly by Hispanics for decades. White and black Milwaukeeans remain segregated.

There are many reasons why Milwaukee's segregation continues to fester like an infected wound, according to researchers, housing policy analysts, community leaders and residents. They include fair housing ordinances that continue to be difficult to enforce; the impact of historic discriminatory policies such as racially restrictive covenants, redlining and other unfair lending practices; freeway projects such as the construction of I-43 that facilitated white flight and isolated central city neighborhoods; and the unwillingness of suburban Milwaukee counties to provide affordable housing options or welcome non-white neighbors, according to Reggie Jackson, head griot at America's Black Holocaust Museum, and others.

Combine those factors with the collapse of industry in Milwaukee, which limited social mobility for the city's suddenly exploding low-income population, and the end result is "little progress over the last 50 years, when it comes to ending segregation," Jackson added.

Referring to the lack of affordable housing options in the suburbs, the Rev. Willie Brisco told a crowd gathered for a Community Brainstorming Conference in April 2017, "What they're telling us ... is, 'We want your labor but we don't want you around our homes or around our children.'" Brisco is president emeritus of Milwaukee Inner-City the Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH).

According to Jackson, who has conducted research on



Houses on the 3300 block of North 8th Street are similar to the North Side homes razed to build I-43. (Photo by Adam Carr)

segregation, 91 percent of blacks in the Milwaukee metro area live in the city of Milwaukee, while 58 percent work there.

"The suburbs won't build enough housing to accommodate residents of the inner city who work there because they don't want us there," said Manuel.

Dr. Marcus Britton, an associate professor of sociology at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said that across the nation, housing segregation has decreased slowly, but substantially. Though areas in the Midwest and Northeast have seen less progress, Milwaukee remains an outlier even among them, Britton said.

"Progress has been slower here. The Milwaukee metro area has the lowest rates of black suburbanization," Britton explained. In other metro areas, segregation is more likely to be based on income level, but in Milwaukee, that's less the

case, he added.

"Even blacks that have more resources are more likely to live in a low-income neighborhood than poor whites," Britton said.

The result of racial inequities due to segregation is devastating. African-Americans living in segregated neighborhoods are more likely to live in poverty, leading to the social ills — lower educational attainment, mass incarceration, teenage pregnancy, increased exposure to violence and other negative health consequences — that accompany it, he said.

Black neighborhoods are also more likely to have polluting facilities and failing schools, Britton added. In late March, North Side residents gathered at Jerusalem Mission-

ary Baptist Church, 2505 W. Cornell St., to voice concerns about the mishandling of hazardous chemicals by a local drum refurbishing company. During the meeting, 74-year-old Ruby Snowden, who lives near Lloyd Barbee Montessori School, said, "You know, it's benign neglect. It's about the haves and have-nots."

Sitting in a coffee shop in Sherman Park, Jackson recalls a much more hopeful Milwaukee.

"When I grew up in the 53206 neighborhood it was thriving. The impact of segregation and the crashing economy was the perfect storm," said Jackson, who gives presentations around

the city about the subject. His audiences are typically very diverse and typically lack a full understanding of segregation in Milwaukee, he said.

"People aren't paying attention to how we got to where we are now. The level of distrust between communities because of segregation has gotten us to the point where people don't even recognize the need to live in diverse communities," Jackson said.

Manuel agrees. "When Caucasians come to the North Side, they're scared to get carjacked and when we go to the suburbs we're scared that we're going to get arrested and go to prison," he said.

Federal policies meant to integrate neighborhoods across the country, including Milwaukee, have never fully succeeded, according to Kori Schneider-Peragine, a senior administrator of the Inclusive Communities Program at

Milwaukee Metropolitan Fair Housing Council (MMFHC). The often-ignored aspect of the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 is that cities were required to proactively reverse residential segregation, Schneider-Peragine said.

A new regulation meant to enforce that promise, “affirmatively furthering fair housing,” was adopted in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the Obama administration, but is currently in jeopardy, she added. It required cities and towns that receive federal funding to examine their housing practices by utilizing publicly available data and other tools to uncover bias based on race and other factors. The grantees are to utilize the findings to set priorities and goals to meet longstanding fair housing obligations.

“There is no fair housing. They won’t build affordable housing in the suburbs so a lot of people end up stuck here without access to good jobs,” said Linda Wheeler, 55, as she stood on her faded red porch on West Center Street in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood.

“If communities are discriminating in housing they should lose funding. Segregation didn’t happen organically; it was created.”

Though policy changes can address the lack of affordable housing in the suburbs, it will be more difficult to end covert discrimination, Schneider-Peragine said. “You used to be able to tell someone to their face, ‘I don’t want to rent to you,’ but now you smile and tell them nothing’s available,” she added.

The mission of the MMFHC, where Schneider-Peragine has worked for 19 years, is to promote fair housing in the state by combatting housing discrimination. The council conducts investigations utilizing faux renters with similar



Reggie Jackson, head griot at America’s Black Holocaust Museum, has studied residential segregation in Milwaukee. (Photo by Edgar Mendez)

income levels, but differing racial, gender or other characteristics to uncover discrimination. The organization also investigates claims of unfair lending practices and provides trainings on fair housing regulations for housing providers and others.

In recent months there has been an increase in hate crimes and other aggressive actions reported to the council, according to Schneider-Peragine. “Lately it’s been not so subtle,” she said.

Unfortunately, according to Jackson, the Fair Housing Council doesn’t have enough staff to investigate all the instances of unfair housing practices, nor are most of them reported. With limited incomes and housing options, residents of Milwaukee’s central city are likely to remain where they grew up or nearby, he added.

And while some of the city’s suburbs, such as Brown Deer, where 29 percent of residents are black, and Glendale, where 14 percent are black, have made progress toward desegregation by increasing the affordable housing options, most have not. In both Greendale and Hales Corners, only 1 percent of residents are black, according to 2010 U.S. Census data compiled by Jackson.

Jackson wants Milwaukeeans to push elected officials to enforce existing open housing laws.

“If communities are discriminating in housing they should lose funding,” Jackson said. “Segregation didn’t happen organically; it was created.” ■

Rozga shares legacy of open housing marches through play, poems

By Michael Brennan

Margaret Rozga has spent a good part of her adult life making sure that Milwaukeeans remember the fight for open housing in the city beginning in summer 1967. A civil rights activist and poet who participated in 200 straight days of marches, she has told the powerful story of what happened on the 16th Street Viaduct through a play, a volume of poetry and her work with a local arts education group.

Rozga got her start in play writing at University of Wisconsin-Waukesha, where she was then an assistant professor. "UW-Waukesha had a 'campus read' program that would have a theme every year," Rozga said. "The theater department would always do a play based on the theme as well. This particular year, the theme was race and racism. So the theater director came up to me and said, 'You're going to write the play.'"

Rozga, who earned a master's degree and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, had never written a play before, but she accepted the offer. Her play, "March On Milwaukee: A Memoir of the Open Housing Protests," was first performed in April 2007.

Rozga had some difficulties at the start.

"What was hard about writing that play, coming from my perspective as a poet, was the fact that when you write poetry, you don't have to worry about what the speaker of the poem does with his or her body," Rozga said. "But when you're writing for the theater, people just can't stand up there and talk. You need action."

Once Rozga overcame the initial issues, she wrote a play that was performed on the campus of the UW-Waukesha and at venues in the city of Milwaukee.

After the performances, Rozga decided to adapt the play into poems.

"Staging a play is difficult," Rozga said. "You need a venue, a director, actors, you need tickets. If I were to turn this into poems, I could do it all myself. So I did."

Rozga's book of poems, "200 Nights and One Day," was published in 2009. The book tells the history of the open housing marches through the eyes of participants. In the first poem, "Prologue to Milwaukee," Rozga writes of "People on the march/moving the heart and soul of a White /Roman Catholic Priest at St. Boniface Church."



Margaret Rozga

The priest, the Rev. James Groppi, led the open housing marches, and later became Rozga's husband, for which he was excommunicated from the church.

Rozga wants to pass her love for art and the importance of the open housing marches to the next generation. Working with Arts @ Large, she got in touch with a teacher at Nova High School whose students were learning about the Milwaukee civil rights movement.

"The goal of this organization was to ultimately have the students' work be on display in a museum exhibit," Rozga said. After they completed the civil rights unit, the students created an exhibit at the Arts @ Large gallery. The exhibit included artwork that encapsulated the students' takes on the history of the Milwaukee civil rights movement.

"It was a terrific exhibit," Rozga said. The students also began to do better academically because of the art project, she noted.

"There was one student who was attending school 23 percent of the time," Rozga said. "When he got involved in the study of [civil rights] and turning it into visual means that other people could learn from, he started coming all the time. He ended up with 98 percent attendance."

Rozga is proud that she has been able to reach another generation through her writing and work for racial justice. "When teens learn that the open housing marches in Milwaukee included high school students, and some even younger, 7th and 8th graders at St. Boniface School, they find that empowering. They begin to see active roles for themselves. They begin to see themselves as agents for social justice." ■

Housing discrimination personal issue for open housing marcher's family

By Brian Morrissey

In the 1960s, African-Americans were limited to purchasing homes on Milwaukee's North Side simply because of the color of their skin. As a young black girl, Lyneria Childs McGhee always questioned this.

"That was a big issue for me coming up," she added. "Well, how come we can't do this? How come we can't buy here? Why can't we move there?"

This was of great importance to her because the size of McGhee's family made it difficult for them to find adequate places to live. Additionally, some property owners would refuse to sell to them.

"The white landlords wouldn't rent to my dad," McGhee said. "He needed at least three bedrooms with the eight of us."

McGhee's family finally tracked down a house on the corner of 5th and Chambers streets that suited their needs. However, it was a struggle at times to pay for rent, food and unexpected hospital bills. The Rev. James Groppi, a pastor at St. Boniface Catholic Church, did as much as he could to support the McGhee family in their time of need.

"My mom got real sick. We almost lost her. And my dad had to take off work a lot," McGhee said. "So Father Groppi pitched in and gave him money to help him with rent and food. He would even come and get us for lunch and then take us back to school."

With Groppi's encouragement, all of the McGhee children got involved in the open housing marches. In 1967, Lyneria McGhee, then 14, joined the NAACP Youth Council. In August, Youth Council members began a 200-night demonstration for open housing policies in Milwaukee.

All 200 nights were filled with anticipation for McGhee and her siblings, but before they could go on the marches they had to finish their homework. McGhee recalled a situation in which her sister Mary Ann was unable to attend a march. "Mary Ann couldn't go once because she had a math problem she couldn't solve. She was pretty upset," McGhee said with laughter. "It was about 10 p.m. and my dad goes to bed early because he has to get up for work. So he got out of bed and he stayed up to help her solve her problem."

On each of the 200 nights counter-protestors demonstrated against open housing. Although some of these

protestors were violent and shouted hateful words, McGhee did her best not to look down on them.

"They had never interacted with blacks. All they knew was 'black had to get back,'" McGhee said. "I don't know if it was instilled in them, if they knew any black people or if they were just taught that without getting to know a black person."

On April 30, 1968, Milwaukee finally passed open housing legislation. Congress later passed a law that made it



Lyneria Childs McGhee

illegal to refuse to sell or rent houses to someone based on their race, color, religion, sex, familial status or national origin.

McGhee resides today at Northlawn, 5145 N. 20th St., a predominantly black affordable housing community run by the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee. It is not how she envisioned her adult life as a child.

"I had this idea of the American dream, traveling and retiring. I just wanted to be comfortable," McGhee said. "But this place is the best I can do in my current financial situation." ■

To view a video interview with Lyneria Childs McGhee, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/housing-discrimination-personal-issue-for-open-housing-marchers-family.php>

Anger motivated marcher to participate in open housing demonstrations

By Margaret Cannon

Prentice McKinney is the son of parents born in the Deep South. His mother was used to people discriminating against her family because of the color of their skin. But to 16-year-old Prentice, it came as quite a shock.

"I grew up in the city," McKinney said. "I had never seen discrimination."

McKinney was born in Chicago and raised in Milwaukee. He says that as a child, he was like a lot of the kids he saw around him.

"I was into devilment like most kids in the ghetto with nothing to do, skipping school and that kind of thing," McKinney said.

But at the age of 16, McKinney said things started to change. He credits his involvement in the NAACP Youth Council to the fact that Freedom House, where the group met, was one block away from his home. The Rev. James Groppi led the group in fighting for civil rights in Milwaukee during the late 1960s.

"Groppi was one of the smoothest cats I ever met," McKinney said.



Prentice McKinney

Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council spurred a protest to change the law to prohibit housing discrimination. Beginning with marches across the 16th Street Viaduct, also known as the "Mason-Dixon line" of Milwaukee because it marked the border between the predominantly black North Side and predominantly white South Side, they continued to march for 200 nights.

McKinney was no stranger to housing discrimination. After his family was told they could not purchase a home on the South Side, the young McKinney was motivated by anger to learn about the issues facing his people.

"I started to find out about something called 'land title covenants,'" McKinney said. The deeds made it legal for owners to sell their property only to whites. "That infuriated me," he said

McKinney rose through the ranks at Freedom House, becoming a member of the Commandos, a group of 10-15 young black men whose role was to protect Groppi and the marchers from violent counter-protestors.

"We demanded respect. We weren't violent, but we weren't nonviolent."

As a Commando, McKinney's job was to keep the lines intact as the marchers walked across the bridge each night. The Commandos did not believe in violence, but they also did not believe in letting people take advantage of them.

"We demanded respect," McKinney said. "We weren't violent, but we weren't nonviolent."

The marchers were met with strong opposition whenever they crossed the bridge onto the South Side. Each night, crowds of angry whites would throw bricks and scream racist, vulgar remarks at the protestors.

"The police, in most cases were aggressive towards us, not aggressive towards the counter-protestors," McKinney said.

When police had to intervene, they would face the white crowd with tear gas. But when they pulled the pin to release the tear gas, it would slip out of their hands and fall backwards on the marchers, McKinney recalled. This forced the marchers to run from the tear gas and into the white mob.

"It was 200 nights of getting arrested, fighting with the police, trying to protect the marchers, and, on occasion, going to jail," McKinney said.

Anger kept him going all those nights, and still keeps him going today, he said. Participating in the open housing marches gave him an experience that would guide him for the rest of his life. Today, McKinney remains a political activist in the community and always asks himself what he can do to make a difference.

"It's kind of been the story of my life," McKinney said. "To be involved, to fight injustice, and to inspire others." ■

To view a video interview with Prentice McKinney, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/anger-motivated-marcher-to-participate-in-open-housing-demonstrations.php>





Councilwoman Vel Phillips speaks at a Milwaukee Common Council meeting in 1970. (Archival image from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee March on Milwaukee Civil Rights History Project)

‘We fought just as hard’: Women in the March on Milwaukee

By Naomi Waxman

Deborah Campbell Tatum was just a young girl when the civil rights movement began to sweep the nation, but her involvement in the fight for open housing in Milwaukee changed her life forever.

“When the open housing march[es] started, it was the first time I saw [African-Americans] come together as a race of people, and just people ... coming together. It was all colors,” said Tatum. “Being a child, to see that was lovely. I never missed a day. That was the beginning of my political life.”

In Milwaukee, Velvlea “Vel” Phillips was setting an example for African-American women and girls with political aspirations. The first woman to graduate from University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, the first woman and African-American member of Milwaukee’s Common Council,

the first woman and African-American elected secretary of state in Wisconsin: Phillips demonstrated to all what African-American women could accomplish in politics, and set the stage for black women to leverage political power.

Phillips first proposed an open housing ordinance in 1962. Despite several attempts, the council failed to pass the ordinance for the next six years. It took the 1968 Fair Housing Act, passed by Congress a week after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for the Common Council to approve a fair housing law in Milwaukee.

As Phillips was fighting for civil rights as a member of the council, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, founded in 1947, provided leadership opportunities for young women that were absent in other aspects of their lives, according to Dr. Erica Metcalfe, a Milwaukee native and assistant professor at Texas Southern University, who earned her bachelor’s and

master's degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. It was under the leadership of the Youth Council's first president, Susan Warren, that the chapter was nationally recognized for activism in the 1950s. Other young women also served as Youth Council presidents.

"Girls were empowered by the leadership skills that membership within the Youth Council afforded them," Metcalfe wrote.

Alberta Harris Moore, a high school student at the time, played a fundamental role in the open housing movement and

"I feel females were a big driving force in the movement. I never felt that we weren't equal partners in what was going on in the movement."

facilitated the collaboration between the Rev. James Groppi and the Youth Council, which she served as president. Moore first met Groppi as a student at St. Boniface Church School.

"Father Groppi was so in tune to how I envisioned the Youth Council to be — an organization involved in direct action," said Moore, now 71. In 1965, the group's advisor was thinking of leaving. "I asked if he [Groppi] would consider being our advisor. At first he said no, but I persisted. He decided he'd come on temporarily until we found another advisor. He never left."

Groppi encouraged Moore's cousin, Vada Harris, to become involved in the movement. One of the first African-American students to attend the predominantly white Riverside University High School, Harris, now deceased, led a "textbook turn-in" protest in which she and other students returned their history books and walked out of class to challenge the exclusion of African and African-American history.

In 1966, however, the dynamic shifted. The Commandos, formed partially in response to threats and bombings, emerged as a new male security unit intent on protecting protesters from violence and representing African-American men in a distinguished light.

"When the marches reached the highest numbers, a lot of new [men] joined. [Many] were veterans who had finished their enlistment period," said Margaret Rozga, a former member of the Youth Council who later married Groppi. She added that at that point the direct action committee, which was responsible for developing strategy and taking part in protests, took a more central role. "Within that group was the Commandos, [which] was all male," Rozga said.

Still, Rozga said, the environment was friendly and comfortable for female members.

"Other voices were still respected," she added. "There were lots of opportunities for discussion so it wasn't an antagonistic atmosphere at all."

"In Milwaukee, we were hand-in-hand with men involved," agreed Moore. "I feel females were a big driving force in the movement. I never felt that we weren't equal partners in what was going on in the movement, even on the national level."

Some young women in the Youth Council, however, were unhappy with the Commandos' all-male leadership and proposed a vote to include women. Nearly every male in the council voted against the proposal.

"What that said to the female members was that the role of protector was reserved for men," said Metcalfe. "People had a kind of egalitarian philosophy when it came to race but didn't have that same philosophy when it came to gender, that males and females should have the same opportunities."

The Commandos' dignified, defiant image of African-American manhood was designed to combat a sense of dehumanization caused by segregation and demeaning terms such as "boy" that had long operated as a means of socially emasculating black men.

"Being treated as a man, having this image of strong black manhood, was very important to [the Commandos]," Metcalfe said. "It was also important to them because of Father Groppi. He was a white male and some people looked at that [and said], 'You're not even leading your own movement.' They needed to create a unit that embodied black male leadership."

In the wake of the failed vote to include women in the Commandos, Youth Council member Mary Arms, who had come up with the name Commandos, suggested creating the "Commando-ettes," an informal female counterpart unit.

"We fought just as hard. We were right there by their side," said Arms in an interview for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's March on Milwaukee Civil Rights History Project. "We felt like we needed a name but it didn't really stick with us."

"People had a kind of egalitarian philosophy when it came to race but didn't have that same philosophy when it came to gender."

She said the Commando-ettes were responsible for leading songs and chants to keep up momentum during the marches, as well as monitoring for agitators or police plants seeking to



Father James Groppi and Vel Phillips stand atop the hood of a bus, surrounded by members of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council. (Archival image from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee March on Milwaukee Civil Rights History Project)

cause a disturbance. “We didn’t really do too much of anything but parade back and forth,” Arms said.

For many, Metcalfe said, civil rights became “a family thing,” that built camaraderie among relatives and friends. Mothers and grandmothers fed protesters and made sure that the young women were being treated well.

“At that time, the race issue kind of overshadowed the gender issue. The young women ... let the situation with the Commando-ettes go,” said Metcalfe. “They felt that their issues had to be put to the side because of the [focus on] race.”

The familial nature of activism, however, still remains

strong today. Tatum’s daughter, Chantia Lewis, is now an alderwoman in the 9th District.

Lewis credits her mother with instilling in her a passion for justice. “I would not have my activism spirit without [her] and the work that [she] put in,” she said.

Glad to hand her torch to the next generation of leaders, Tatum is proud of the legacy she and the NAACP Youth Council established. “I started, but now my daughter is moving forward,” she said. ■

Editor’s note: Jenny Fischer contributed to this article.

Open housing marches a family affair for former Youth Council member

By Jennifer Walter

Standing in front of a baby-blue mural depicting a crowd of young men linking arms with a priest and flooding a Milwaukee street, Claudette Harris is engulfed in memories.

“It brings you back,” Harris said. “Locked arm-in-arm, there we go ... marching.”

Across the street from Harris’s former workplace on Dr. Martin Luther King Drive, two murals feature artist renditions of photos from the NAACP Youth Council open housing marches in the 1960s.

Harris, who was formerly a day care director for Heart-Love Place, was a teenager when she participated in the marches. In 1967, she was present at the 16th Street Viaduct when the Youth Council marchers were met by violent counter-protests that resulted in a response from the National Guard. Harris also was arrested at 14 years old alongside

many of her peers at a protest in front of the Eagles Club in 1966.

“There were good memories and bad memories,” she said. “But I’m glad I was part of it because it made a difference in the city of Milwaukee.”

When the marches began, Harris said her whole family was involved. She marched alongside relatives — her older sister, Allie, was Youth Council president. To prepare for marches, members would gather at the Freedom House, the Youth Council’s headquarters. They would share meals, make posters and sing. Harris recalls that her mother always supported the children’s participation.

“My mother was always cooking something for everybody,” Harris said. Her family often invited the Rev. James Groppi, organizer of the Youth Council, over for dinner. The marches even involved Florence, Harris’s sister and the youngest member of her family. A while back she picked up a copy of “200 Nights and One Day,” a book by Margaret



Claudette Harris, a former NAACP Youth Council member, stands on the 16th Street Viaduct. (Photo by Jennifer Walter)



The murals at Martin Luther King Jr. Peace Place depicting NAACP Youth Council Commandos and the Rev. James Groppi. (Photo by Adam Carr)

(Peggy) Rozga, Groppi’s wife. She was surprised to find a photo of Florence while flipping through the book.

“My little baby sister was in the picture, holding Peggy’s hand,” Harris said. “I looked at the picture and thought, ‘Wow, look at this. Florence was even involved and she was just a 10-year-old.’”

The generations that follow, said Harris, have not been as active in their community as the Youth Council was during the 1960s. Issues such as police violence, black-on-black crime and inner city poverty are sometimes swept under the rug by young people today, she noted.

“There’s still so many things to fight for, but it seems young people have gotten complacent ... they just take care of themselves,” Harris said. “Everybody has their groups, they take care of their groups, and that’s it.” Harris even notices complacency in her own grandkids. She doesn’t see them taking action to protest injustice and stand up for those who are unrepresented.

“They’ve got their own little worlds, but you can’t be that

selfish. I tell them that all the time,” Harris said. “You’ve got to know what’s going on in your community, and you’ve got to be part of your community to fix things.”

Almost 50 years after the marches, remnants of the Youth Council’s efforts are scattered around Milwaukee. The 16th Street Viaduct, once an infamous site of protest, is now named the Father James Groppi Memorial Bridge. The murals at Peace Place, the park on N. Martin Luther King Drive, keep the memory of the marchers alive.

Una Van Duvall, fund development director for Heart-Love Place, said the murals were originally created for another location, but Peace Place was a more visible spot to capture the history of open housing.

“It’s a nod to history and a wink to the future of what justice looks like in Milwaukee,” Van Duvall said. ■

To hear an audio interview with Claudette Harris, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/open-housing-marches-a-family-affair-for-former-youth-council-member.php>

“They’ve got their own little worlds, but you can’t be that selfish. I tell them that all the time. You’ve got to know what’s going on in your community, and you’ve got to be part of your community to fix things.”

Open housing marcher says 'state of the city has gotten worse'

By Alex Groth

Earl Bracy didn't notice his picture being taken, but 47 years later, it would be on a pamphlet about segregation in Milwaukee.

In the iconic photo, Bracy, 68, is gripping the American flag, participating in the 1967 open housing marches alongside the Rev. James Groppi and hundreds of black Milwaukee residents.

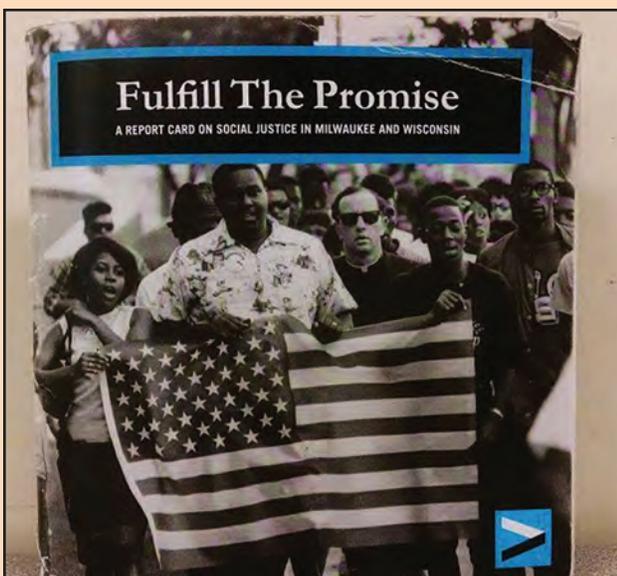
The pamphlet, titled "Fulfill The Promise," was created by Greater Together, a nonprofit organization that promotes racial and economic equity.

According to data compiled by Greater Together, Milwaukee is the number one city for black and white residential segregation among the 102 largest metro areas. Milwaukee is also the worst metropolitan area for residential segregation based on poverty.

In Bracy's view, "The state of the city has gotten worse, which is alarming because as we progress things should be getting better."

Bracy decided to participate in the marches as a young man because he felt what he called "the sting of racism": discrimination because of the color of his skin.

He and fellow marchers demanded open housing and better treatment by the police department. Bracy recalled



Earl Bracy (holding flag) walks with the Rev. James Groppi during an open housing march.



Earl Bracy

that the police repeatedly followed him home for no reason from Freedom House, the meeting place of the NAACP Youth Council.

"[At] 27th and Wisconsin you'd see a police officer pulling a black man over," Bracy said. "A few blocks further and you'd see the same thing."

He often felt weighed down by the racism he encountered. Referring to the white counter-demonstrators, Bracy said, "It was kind of an invasion of their territory — that's the way I saw it."

For Bracy, understanding the past is key to establishing a platform for change. "They always say 'if you don't know where you've been, you won't know where you're going.'"

A psychologist who works with youth and families, Bracy said he thinks the younger generations are not as invested in social change as people were during the marches. "I don't see the same zeal in a lot of the young people," he added. "Sometimes they don't really buy into what's happened in the past."

According to Bracy, the younger generation doesn't appreciate or strive to learn about the sacrifices made during the marches, contributing to the lack of progress.

"A lot of them are just clueless," Bracy said. "They can walk through doors and the doors are wide open, but they don't know why." ■

To view a video interview with Earl Bracy, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/open-housing-marcher-says-state-of-the-city-has-gotten-worse.php>

Marcher sees link between open housing marches, Sherman Park unrest

By Matthew Unger

Nearly fifty years separate the Milwaukee open housing marches from the civil unrest in Sherman Park that took place in August 2016. However, Barbara David Salas, a member of the NAACP Youth Council in the 1960s, and a participant in the marches across Milwaukee's "Mason-Dixon line" in 1967-1968, says that the city still has invisible barriers that hold back people of color.

"Issues that were brought to the spotlight in 1967 have not been resolved yet today," Salas said. "Just because you have a neighbor that is African-American, does not mean the world has changed for your neighbor."

Recent studies show that not much has changed in the city of Milwaukee in the past half-century. According to a 2013 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee study, fewer than 9 percent of African-Americans in the Milwaukee metropolitan area reside in the suburbs.

A 2016 study conducted by the National Urban League also found that Milwaukee has the second-largest income gap between whites and African-Americans. In addition, 17.3 percent of blacks reported being jobless compared to just 4.3 percent of whites.

According to a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee report, the city has the highest incarceration rate in the country for African-American men. Additionally, two-thirds of incarcerated men come from the six poorest ZIP codes. The gap in high school graduation rates among African-Americans and whites is also the highest in the nation.

The Sherman Park neighborhood is an example of these disparities. The median household income is \$26,676 compared to \$43,385 in the city as a whole; and the unemployment rate is 14.2 percent in the mostly black community, compared to 3.9 percent for the city.

Salas, who remains a civil rights activist, has seen the racial divisions in the city firsthand. In addition to marching across what is now called the James E. Groppi Unity Bridge during the 1967-1968 marches, her family was involved in the Milwaukee school desegregation lawsuit. She sees similarities between the Sherman Park civil unrest and the open housing marches.

"I don't believe in violence; the people in the Sherman Park neighborhood don't believe in violence; vandalism is against the law," Salas said. "However, people tend to put



Barbara David Salas

the emphasis on that rather than the underlying issue."

"If somebody is not willing to stand up and force the issue, nothing is going to happen. We still unfairly put a burden on our African-American citizens."

Although Salas acknowledges there have been signs of progress, she still believes more needs to be done in terms of equality and justice. "It (housing law) was a very visible issue that was addressed in many portions of the country," Salas said. "There are as many serious or more serious issues but they're not being addressed."

"White privilege exists in this country, and people do not address that issue. They deny it. They declare that their privilege has been earned by their ancestors. These are the issues that are going to have to be taken on before this becomes a society where everyone has a fair chance," she added.

Many of the frustrations Salas expressed were manifested in the Sherman Park uprising, she said.

At the same time, citizens there feel like the government is idle in addressing their concerns and problems. According to Salas, individuals nationwide need to wake up and realize these issues still exist.

"People just cannot seem to wrap their heads around the fact that if you believe in justice, then you have to stop putting the burden on one group," Salas said. "We unfairly put a burden on our African-American citizens to solve the problem. ... The problem is all of ours, and the people most responsible for solving it should be the people in power."

"If they're not willing to do it, then pressure needs to be put on them." ■

To view a video interview with Barbara David Salas, visit <http://milwaukeeenns.org/open-housing/marcher-sees-link-between-open-housing-marches-sherman-park-unrest.php>



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Fight for equality must be rooted in community, sustainability, leaders say

By Jabril Faraj

Frank Miller, a sergeant in the Milwaukee Police Department and head of its tactical squad during the late 1960s, left behind a couple items when he died. One was a scrapbook that, among other things, included a “wanted” poster with his face on it that was published by an alternative newspaper in 1969 and called for his dismissal from the force. The other was a checkbook-sized spiral notebook that contained the names, addresses and mug shots of the Milwaukee Commandos, a branch of the NAACP Youth Council instrumental in the 1967 Open Housing marches.

“I’ve never seen a book like this,” said Prentice McKinney, 70, an original member of the Commandos. “Why would he carry that book?”

The tactical squad was assigned to observe and report on the Commandos, and, at times, engaged in intimidation tactics against the young men. McKinney, who is featured on the third page, thinks the notebook wasn’t officially issued — it strikes him as personal — and not surprising. McKinney said it’s to be expected for anyone who “seeks to disturb the balance of this city,” one he calls “the most racist city around.”

The Commandos clashed with police at times during the marches but were clear that their role as protectors necessitated they not instigate violence. However, unlike other civil rights groups, they were not willing to endure violence either. “If you struck one of us, we were not gonna lay down and let you beat us,” McKinney said.

Gail Hicks, a former special education teacher and participant in the marches, said Milwaukee has been segregated since black people began to migrate north to the city. The African-American community was generally confined to an area bounded by 20th Street, 1st Street, Center Street and North Avenue. However, according to Hicks, “it wasn’t really thought about or visible” until the city, exercising eminent domain, made way for construction of the I-43 (formerly US 141) expressway by tearing down houses and closing black-



Black residents, leaders and elected officials stand in solidarity at a Garden Homes press conference in early 2015 that marked the beginning of the Safe Zones Initiative. (Photo by Jabril Faraj)

owned businesses in the early 1960s.

“Now, [there] was no place to move,” she said.

A group led by the Commandos, the Youth Council and the Rev. James Groppi marched for 200 consecutive nights, many times crossing the 16th Street Viaduct to the overwhelmingly white South Side. During the marches, they encountered thousands of hostile counter-protesters and occasional police brutality.

The Milwaukee Common Council passed a citywide Open Housing Ordinance in April 1968, after voting it down multiple times. But, 50 years later, according to McKinney and Hicks, the jury is out on whether the marches and the ordinance were ultimately a success.

Still, there is one aspect of the movement McKinney refuses to dismiss.

“What was more important (than success) was that we stood up,” he said. “I would rather die ... standing up fighting for something than bending down accepting it.”

Following hundreds of race riots (including in Milwaukee) that swept the nation during the “long hot summer” of 1967, federal and state governments began allocating funds to inner-city programs across the country in an effort to prevent further unrest. In a controversial move, which Groppi characterized as a “sell out,” some of the Commandos decided to break from the Youth Council and move into social service. They applied for and received funds to create

a work program that employed more than 250 inner-city youth in 1968.

Over the next decade, the Commandos became a force in Milwaukee's central city, providing counseling, employment and re-entry programs, as well as operating two halfway houses, an annual summer camp and an alternative high school. But beginning in 1981 with President Ronald Reagan's cuts to urban social service programs, the Commandos began to struggle. Shortly after 1990, as a result of diminished funding, the Commandos disappeared.

New leadership

These days, a new guard of black leaders has taken on the fight for equality.

Segregation has continued — for economic rather than legal reasons. The city is home to some of the greatest racial disparities in the nation when it comes to poverty, incarceration, employment and educational achievement.

Many of the city's black people feel restricted by "social, political and ... unspoken rules," according to Vaun Mayes, a local activist.

Last year, Mayes and Gabriel Taylor founded Program the Parks, a grassroots organization that works with struggling youth in Sherman Park.

"There's still that sense of, 'We don't belong here,'" said Mayes, referring to the case of Corey Stingley, who was killed in 2012 by three white civilians while being restrained

after shoplifting from a West Allis store. Mayes said he gets "numerous calls" regarding "racial incidents, dealing with being in those areas outside of Milwaukee."

Mayes and Taylor said the issues that affect Milwaukee's black community hit young people the hardest because, many times, they are not able to meet their own needs. As a result, black youth are unfairly criminalized early on, they said.

This understanding has informed the group's focus, which is to empower young people in an effort to "instill a spirit of entrepreneurship." Mayes said he wants to help provide them with the tools to function outside of the system. He added, "It's a different mindset than what we are taught."

Khalil Coleman, a co-founder of Safe Zones, called the movement for black lives, which has come to the fore as a result of high-profile instances of violence, "the fight for black people to find their purpose." Black Lives Matter and more than 50 other organizations are part of the coalition; no Milwaukee organizations are officially involved.

A pillar of Safe Zones is for individuals formerly involved in criminal activity or previously affected by violence to act as ambassadors who help prevent violence before it happens. However, the future of the initiative is in question after a split between Coleman and Shawn Moore, another co-founder.

"Our practices became different and our perspectives became different," said Coleman, adding, "We saved some lives.



Khalil Coleman (right) speaks with a neighborhood resident near 16th Street and North Avenue. (Photo by Jabril Faraj)



Gail Hicks sits at a picnic table in the South Side's Kosciuszko Park, often a destination of the 1967 marches. (Photo by Jabril Faraj)

That was definitely worth it.”

The initiative, which has demonstrated success despite only operating for a total of nine months over the last two years, was hampered by a lack of cooperation from police and insufficient funding.

Moore said it's not enough to demonstrate that something like Safe Zones can be done — he said it's important to be available to people when they need help. He added that the movement must be grounded in trust and loyalty to the community, “and knowing that you're accountable to those people.”

Markasa Tucker, a founder of UBLAC (Uplifting Black Liberation and Community), an advocacy organization led by black women, queer and trans individuals, echoed Moore. She said, while people may hold different beliefs, those who are fighting for change must agree on the importance of love, growth and sustainability.

“We can't hold grievances. ... The work still needs to be done and that's what the focus needs to be,” she said. “I'm interested in people's lives being affected and changed.”

And, unlike the Commandos, which some historians say became too reliant on government funding, the movement must constantly evolve and develop new leadership to maintain its energy, according to those interviewed. Like the open housing marches

in the 1960s, that leadership has to start with the young people, they said, stressing the importance of not shielding children from the realities of the world.

Erica Metcalfe, author of a 2015 article on the Commandos, acknowledged the importance of community support, which was essential to the success of the late-1967 economic boycotts of Schlitz, the biggest beer brand in Milwaukee, and local stores, particularly those in the downtown area, selling “gifts, decorations, or any other Christmas materials.” Though the boycotts did not have an immediate effect, they demonstrated the power of the black dollar, causing substantial drops in consumption. Hicks said that kind of involvement will again be necessary to transcend the “divide and conquer” tactics of government.

“We've got to stop fighting each other,” said Andre Lee Ellis, founder of We Got This, an initiative meant to train young boys in hard work, agriculture and community. “Your neighbor has

to become your ally.”

He said people must be willing to share resources and invest in each other. “We've got to teach people the old-fashioned way of living. When you lack, and I've got it next door, I'll lend it to you. But, when you go to the grocery store, you pick up some eggs for me, too.”

“Those individual interactions, those small things, it's not small to me — it's grand,” said Taylor. “All the little things we do are grand successes to me.”

Ellis added, “How do we expect anybody else to respect [us], or give us what we ask for, when we can't even treat each other right?” ■



Young men and boys who spent their Saturday mornings with We Got This working in the garden at 9th and Ring streets and the surrounding neighborhood celebrate the last day of the summer program in 2014. (Photo by Andrea Waxman)

Council is more diverse than in 1967, but city faces similar problems

By Julie Grace

A few months ago, Ald. Cavalier “Chevy” Johnson voiced his opposition to a proposed law during a robust discussion at a Milwaukee Common Council meeting. The legislators were debating a minimum sentencing requirement that, if passed, would make it easier to send local kids to Lincoln Hills, a juvenile prison 215 miles and 3½ hours away from home.

During the debate, Johnson, a first-term council member who represents District 2, told a story of a young boy who lived in several rough neighborhoods in Milwaukee nearly 25 years ago. That boy shared a twin-sized bed with four other siblings. He soon began hanging out with the wrong crowd, and he stole gummy worms from a corner store “just to prove he was cool,” Johnson said.

“All (he) needed was a good talking to, and for someone to set him straight — so he’d never steal anything again,” Johnson said. “That kid was me.”

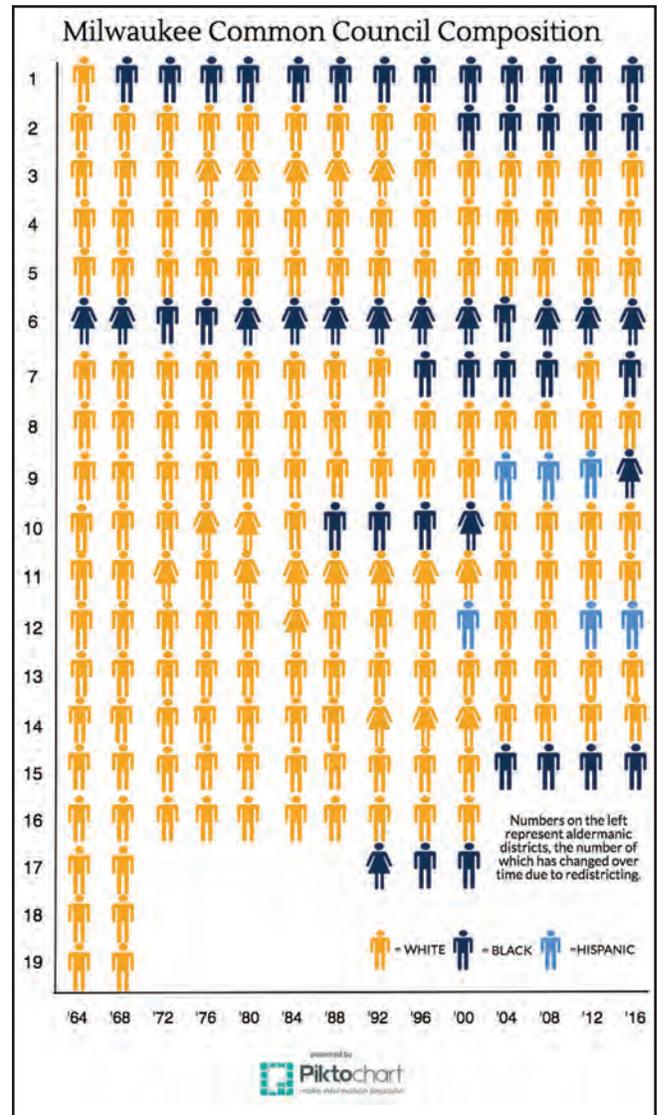
The three aldermen who supported the proposed minimum sentencing law represent more economically well-off districts, while the 11 who opposed it represent lower-income areas.

If such legislation existed when Johnson was a child, he might not be where he is today — a member of the most diverse Common Council in Milwaukee’s history.

Six members of the council are African-American, two are women and one is Hispanic. Johnson works in the same office once held by Ald. Vel Phillips — the first African-American woman on the council, elected in 1964, just three years before the fair housing marches that helped to transform the city forever.

As the city approaches the 50th anniversary of the marches, local legislators recognize that access for all races to housing wasn’t the only issue marchers cared about. Phillips was a pivotal force in advocating not only for fair housing, but also for political action in the areas of welfare, unemployment and education — issues that many council members still advocate for today.

Diversity on the council has improved since Phillips was the only woman and non-white representative in 1967. But even though the council is more diverse now than it was 50 years ago and some policies have been implemented that



Graphic by Julie Grace

reflect this development, the city still hasn’t progressed in ways that the marchers would have envisioned, Johnson said.

“Any time people rise up, voice their grievances, and have the opportunity to move to some other place, or have some other right that was previously denied to them, it’s a good thing,” he said. “At the same time, just because on the policy side things have changed, doesn’t mean the hearts and minds of those in our city, greater community and nation aren’t still hardened.”

Council President Ashanti Hamilton said that while the legislative body is more diverse than ever, the city government still faces very similar challenges to those in 1967.

“We’ve witnessed the problems with having a lack of diversity when you’re trying to push policies that affect a wide variety of people,” Hamilton said. “Inevitably somebody is left out of that process if you don’t have at least enough people who are thinking about it, which is why it’s so important for





Vel Phillips (far left) was the only African-American and the only woman in the 1960-1964 Common Council. (Photo courtesy of Dustin Weis)

the community to see themselves represented in their representatives.”

In the past five decades, African-Americans have won 51 out of 219 possible elections, or 23 percent, in a city that is 40 percent black. Hispanics have won just six of 219, or 2.7 percent, yet represent more than 17 percent of the population. Women have won 34 times.

Milwaukee voters have never elected a mayor who was not white or male. Marvin Pratt, an African-American alderman who served the 1st District for 18 years and was council president for four, was temporarily the city’s chief executive in 2004, after the mayor at the time stepped down. Later that year, Pratt lost his bid for mayor to Tom Barrett, who has held the position since.

A member of the council since 2004, Hamilton is only its fourth non-white president. No woman has held that position, either.

Cities with comparable populations have long done better in terms of diversifying their city leadership. Cleveland had 11 black councilmen in 1967. Frank Jackson, an African-American, has served as that city’s mayor since 2005. Columbus, Ohio, elected its first black mayor in 1999, and Raleigh, North Carolina, did so in 1973.

What does this lack of diversity mean for the Milwaukee council’s ability to enact change? Hamilton, who represents District 1, said that while there’s been a movement away from overt racism in the last 50 years, both in politics and society at large, institutional racism still exists in lawmaking. He cited the city’s “failing school system,” the disparities in sentencing for crack cocaine, lack of economic opportunities for minorities and scarcity of low-income housing.

“It would be very difficult for folks to have a school system in any major metropolitan area, although there are some that are doing OK, that would be failing the way that these are failing if the kids that were in the school were more valued,” Hamilton said.

District 13 Ald. Terry Witkowski, an alderman for 16 years



Milwaukee Common Council begins a recent meeting with a prayer. (Photo by Julie Grace)

who worked for the city since 1968, said that every council member has long wanted a united city. Yet Witkowski attributes that responsibility more to the electorate than to those who are elected.

While Witkowski was one of the three aldermen who voted for the mandatory sentencing amendment, he agreed that institutional racism still exists in policy making. But he disagreed that it’s one of the causes of a failing school system. Rather, he said, the lack of parental involvement is the root cause of achievement differences for minority students.

Regardless of their differences in opinion, council members seem hopeful. Johnson, Hamilton and Witkowski are all confident in their ability to enact laws that benefit all Milwaukeeans.

Hamilton pointed to a specific policy he said speaks to the potential of a diverse council. In 2009, it passed the Milwaukee Opportunities Restoring Employment (M.O.R.E.) legislation, which increased the percentage of residents required to work on city development projects from 25 to 40 percent — including those from disadvantaged communities and who are unemployed or underemployed.

Johnson cited another law that ensured that those who live in the city have the same opportunity as non-city applicants to work for the police department, one of the largest and most powerful in the local government. “If we’re going to have an open and honest and true city, then our departments and the people who make the city go every day should reflect that, too,” he noted.

Witkowski is also optimistic about the current council. Even though increased diversity often leads to increased disagreement, it’s healthy for the city, he said.

“If we were a group of 15 guys, we would focus on guy things,” he said. “If we were all Hispanic, African-American, white, it would all be the same. We’re going to come to the table with our own viewpoint. Period. But that helps give us direction. And the overall attitude is such that we should be working on behalf of the whole. That’s the purpose of government.” ■

Open housing marcher passes legacy of activism to daughter Chantia Lewis

By Jenny Fischer

Milwaukee City Hall's first-ever Black History Program was held in a packed rotunda on a gloomy day in late February 2017. Ald. Chantia Lewis spearheaded the effort to honor strong-willed African-American citizens who have made a difference in the Milwaukee community.

Lewis braced herself before she spoke.

"She's not only my mother, but many of you are like her," Lewis said. "You work behind the scenes. You don't like to be recognized."

Lewis explained that her mother, Deborah (Campbell) Tatum, was one of the children who marched in the Milwaukee open housing marches 50 years ago.

"Everywhere she goes, she has this activism spirit," Lewis said. "She gave me my spirit." Tatum and Lewis embraced on stage, each holding the award.

"Mommy," Lewis said with a laugh, "I wanted to do this for you to show you how much you mean to me and how many lives you have touched."

Tatum said she felt God telling her that Lewis should go into politics. "Chantia was just 10 years old," Tatum said. "I told her, 'Write it down, honey.' I knew she wouldn't, so I did. And I always remembered."

Lewis served in the United States Air Force before being elected to the Milwaukee Common Council as alderwoman of District 9.

Tatum's passion for serving others began when she was a young teenager.

"I think I was 12 or 13 years old at the time," Tatum said. "Father (James) Groppi came around to the classrooms at St. Boniface rallying kids to march with him because he couldn't get much participation."

The marches took place for 200 consecutive days over the 16th Street Viaduct. Thousands advocated for the Common Council to pass an open housing bill.

"We marched twice a day, from the North Side to the South Side and back," Tatum said. "And I never missed a day, either."

Tatum said she wishes she remembered more about that time. "I was just so young," Tatum said. "But I knew right from wrong. I knew what being treated unfairly looked like. And I wanted to help change things."

Lewis said she has always envied her mother's "full-steam-ahead attitude."

Half a century later, her daughter is making similar strides for change.

In addition to her role on the Common Council, Lewis has served for three years on the board of 9to5 Wisconsin, an organization fighting for women's advancement. She was recently appointed to the 9to5 national board.

Tatum said she's seen her passion for serving others come full circle in her grandchildren. "Chantia's kids helped her campaign," Tatum said. "They stuffed envelopes and knocked on

doors. They know what's right and fight for it, too."

Tatum credits the open housing marches for making a difference in Milwaukee.

"We got the bill passed. It took a while, but we rallied and we made it happen," Tatum said. "Now, I live to see it — all the results of all that walking."

Earlier this year Lewis unveiled plans to revitalize the Northwest Side of Milwaukee, the neighborhood where her mother now resides. The plans include a re-imagined Northridge Mall, which has been closed and abandoned since 2003, and the area around it.

Lewis said she will continue to take strides for change, one foot in front of the other, just as her mother did. ■



Deborah Tatum and her daughter, Ald. Chantia Lewis.

To view a video interview with Deborah Tatum and Ald. Chantia Lewis, visit <http://milwaukee.nns.org/open-housing/open-housing-marcher-passes-legacy-of-activism-to-daughter-chantia-lewis.php>



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