

Voices From The Mount Pleasant Oral History Project

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For over six years Cabrini College (now University) students gathered oral histories from Main Line residents from the Mt. Pleasant community in Wayne, most of whom are of African American descent. This oral history project was part of a course called “Democracy and Diversity” in Cabrini’s social justice curriculum. This curriculum seeks to raise awareness of social justice issues among Cabrini students and prepare them to be agents of social change. Barbara Byrd, a resident of Mt. Pleasant, served as co-facilitator for this social justice course. Without her dedicated and tireless effort this project would not have been possible. She encouraged residents to participate in the project and then worked with the Cabrini students to connect the two groups together. Her warmth and enthusiasm helped overcome initial skepticism on both sides and bring everyone together.

Because of its desirable location and aging population, Mt. Pleasant has been a target of developers who have been buying up properties in Mt. Pleasant, often renting them out to students at the local colleges, Cabrini University among them. The students are not always very good neighbors. Generally they have little communication with their neighbors, and, frankly, they often behave like students. They like to party at late hours, park cars wherever there’s a space, and leave their trash for the absent landlord eventually to remove. Some landlord-owned houses have simply been left to deteriorate and then torn down, leaving empty spaces attracting vermin and trash. Some lots now have new construction that is very atypical of the housing around them, often dwarfing the neighboring houses. Sociologists call this pattern “gentrification.” Gentrification is happening in many areas throughout the country. Mt. Pleasant is a rather typical example.

Collecting oral histories from Mt. Pleasant residents cannot stop developers’ interest and involvement in Mt. Pleasant, but it does push back against some of its more negative aspects. One of the most important consequences of the process of oral history gathering is that students become much more aware of the feelings and needs of members of the Mt. Pleasant community. They then work to sensitize their fellow students to become better neighbors.



(FROM TOP): A long-term resident’s home, a developer-owned property, cleared and awaiting new construction, newly constructed housing for sale. *Courtesy of the author.*

The interviewers begin to understand the community's concerns and the disruption a student presence brings to an established family neighborhood. They discover the sense of community and fellowship that pervades the testimonies they collect. They begin to see the residents as individuals who have interesting stories, generally quite different from their own experience. They sometimes even express regret that their own neighborhoods do not have the same sense of community found in Mt. Pleasant.

The oral histories also preserve the history of the Mt. Pleasant community that is gradually being lost as the older generation dies out. Consequently, the oral history collection has focused as much as possible on the older residents. The intent is that these oral histories will be available to future historians. The histories also encourage Mt. Pleasant residents to maintain pride in their neighborhood so they continue to resist gentrification—as they have already resisted the increase of rental properties available to students. Most of these oral histories are available on a YouTube Internet site. Site information is available below, and through the Tredyffrin Library and Cabrini University's Holy Spirit Library.

Cabrini graduate Lilly Hatheway (Cabrini '15) reviewed these histories for her American Studies senior capstone project and found certain recurring themes. One of the strongest themes to emerge is the theme of community. Residents stress over and over again how much they value and cherish the community they have and express their fear that it may be lost. Mazie B. Hall, a schoolteacher and civil rights activist who died in 2006 at age 103, was the matriarch of the community and a major factor in fostering this sense of community. All residents looked up to her for wisdom and guidance. The Community Center that was torn down over thirty years ago played a large part in this child-centered community environment. Many still wish such a building and program existed to continue that sense of community the center fostered. The after-school program currently run by former Mt. Pleasant resident Kevin Stroman at the Carr School building still serves some of that function. The community has also been drawn together by its racial diversity. Most other parts of the Main Line were not welcoming to African Americans and were often outright resistant to racial diversity, something that had always been part of Mt. Pleasant.

Another recurring theme is family. Several family groups have dominated Mt. Pleasant's history, and family has been an organizing and supportive force in the interviewees' lives. The Byrds have been by far the most numerous but several others have also played large parts in Mt. Pleasant history: the Olivers, the Deans, the Jones, the Carters, and many others. Families took care of each



(FROM TOP): Vacant lot owned by developer (one of the missing houses was Mazie B. Hall's home), another long-term resident's house, First Baptist Church, The Carr School. *Courtesy of the author.*

other but they also took in those in need and watched over each other's children. Many families have migration stories of how they got to Mt. Pleasant and some of them tell of harrowing exploits to escape from the south and the bonds of sharecropping.

Most residents talk about the current changes that they see as threats to the community: the developers, the absentee landlords, and the students. They are very concerned that they can no longer think of their neighborhood as a neighborhood of families, a neighborhood where people looked after each other, left their doors unlocked, and where when someone had a barbeque, everyone was invited. No need for invitations. They may not speak of gentrification but they feel its effects on their current lives. It is a primary concern.

In order to hear the voices of Mt. Pleasant it is important to let the residents speak for themselves. The following are selections from the oral histories on some of these major themes. They show the richness and flavor of the experience and thoughts of the members of the community. Many more warm and insightful comments can be found at the website: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKfngXsZC_LQgwaj6oOGK5xzy8Zo4_aWB.

COMMUNITY

Mt. Pleasant tends to speak as one voice about the sense of community that pervaded and largely still pervades the neighborhood. Like every community there are internal squabbles. Families have their internal disagreements and their external rubs. But what people speak about is just how good it was, everyone coming together, everyone supporting each other.

When I was growing up it was very ... oh, my gosh, it was the bestest, bestest neighborhood because everybody knew everybody and nobody really locked their doors back then. You know, we would be out late and playing until I had to go to sleep. But ... our back yard was big so we would play kickball and all the parents [would] kind of watch over everybody. Everybody would watch over the children for whoever's parents were working. It was awesome! I mean I enjoyed growing up here!

— Larez Long

My parents worked. I have two older brothers, one younger sister. With my eldest brother there was a six-year difference, so we took care of ourselves. Our mother took care of us, but for the most part, we took care of ourselves. And we also had neighbors who stayed home who would look after us. They were the older parents – like in a village. If you didn't do right, you knew that you were in trouble before your parents



(FROM TOP): Two more long-term resident's houses, a student rental property, new construction. *Courtesy of the author.*

even got there. And Miss [Mazie B.] Hall was like our surrogate grandmother, because she would always take care of us. She was responsible for us ... all our lives. She was a great influence in our lives.

— Donna Brown

Growing up in Mt. Pleasant was great because Mt. Pleasant basically consisted of four [or five] families. It's either the Byrds, the Alstons, the Hollidays, the Morgans, or the Deans. So everybody knew everybody. You know, you didn't lock your doors. If you weren't doing what you were supposed to do, trust me, one of the neighbors told it, because everyone was family. So, I'm telling your mother you did this, you know, and the way we were raised is that if you did something wrong our parents would say, don't wait until I get home to discipline them. You get them and we'll get them, too. So you knew you had to watch your back all the time because it's either family or somebody was going to tell. We had fun. ... We went up to the center. They had all kinds of activities. You went up there and did your homework and they had baseball, all kinds of things. There was always stuff to do. ... We hated to come home, you know!

— Faith Byrd

RACIAL DIVERSITY

Clearly race was a factor in the lives of many of the interviewees before they became residents of Mt. Pleasant and it continued to be a factor in their lives while living on the Main Line. Mt. Pleasant itself, however, was racially diverse. Residents are quick to point out that historically people of all races have been present and welcome in Mt. Pleasant.

When my husband and I purchased our first home in Ardmore, there was a Quaker woman and ... she helped middle class blacks find homes with a flashlight. She would show the homes in the dark with a flashlight and said this is what it looks like so none of the Caucasian neighbors could see who was coming in. Then she would offer financing so we got our home even though it was a predominantly white neighborhood. We went to a lot of homes, okay? ... This Quaker lady [Margaret Collins] was a friend of Miss [Mazie B.] Hall and she worked for Suburban Fair Housing. ... our first house we got because a Quaker couple put the money down for us. My husband got out of [the] Vietnam [War] and we had to have money down, even though it was a VA loan. ... If it wasn't for the Lord just changing those things around at those times, nothing would have got done.

— Linda Grant

It was always like this was our home. Everyone was family. We didn't do color. We didn't do anything. I have one neighbor who was across the yard. He was white. His family actually had passed, so for about six months he lived here with me. Everyone found it funny that he would call my dad 'uncle' because my father is black and he is white. ... And he would be like, "Yeah, that's my uncle Rob" but, yeah, everyone comes back. I feel safe. It was just the way we were raised. ... I am still that type of person that leaves my door unlocked. It has been that way for years.

— Lisa Carter

FAMILY

One of the largest families in Mt. Pleasant has been the Byrd family. Isaiah Byrd was the family patriarch who was able to settle his large clan along Upper Gulph and the three streets (Mt. Pleasant, Henry, and Fairview) that make up Mt. Pleasant:

My father [Isaiah] had a business, a wood business, [a] restaurant. He employed a lot of people. He bought up a lot of property. And back in the forties, late forties, early fifties, white folk didn't want to sell to black people. But my father was ahead of his time. What he did was there was a man named Wintermere. He was Jewish and my father did a lot of work for him. And my father brought him home for dinner one night. A very rich man, but the way he dressed the kind of car he drove old raggedy Studebaker. You wouldn't think that he had a dime. But he was a millionaire. And my father talked to him and said, "You know, I want to buy houses, but they won't sell to me. I want you to buy the houses for me and I'll buy them back from you. I'll pay you." And that's how he accumulated houses [for his nine children].

— Deacon Ed Byrd



Deacon Ed Byrd

Sometimes the younger generation who grew up in Mt. Pleasant moved away but many have been drawn back by family:

...you have to have something stable Family is important. Without that it's very hard. ... I think if you have your family, it's not everything but it's pretty good. I think it makes things easier. ... I think there's a bond [here] ...that you just can't get rid of. I mean you were born and raised here, you know the people here, and you like it here. I mean I think they like it here. We love it here! The thing to do is come back to where your roots are. So, like I said, I plan on staying here no matter who is on either side of me.

— Stephanie Carol-Wells



Stephanie Carol-Wells and child

MIGRATION

Many of the families in Mt. Pleasant originally came up from the south where they saw the Ku Klux Klan up close and personal, motivating their exodus to the north:

I came from North Carolina [which had] the Klan. I came face-to-face with the Klan. All you had to do [to know who was under that white sheet] was listen to the people talking and you knew who it was. They came to my house one night and my parents confronted them. The only reason they came is because we were farming on the 2/3s [sharecropping rule: two thirds for the sharecropper and one third for the owner of the land] and my father was doing good on that farm and when I say 'good' I mean to the point where we had had the farm for two or three years and we were able to go out and buy a tractor, when the average farmer still had mules. They [the white farmers] had mules. Farm tractors were made but no one could go out and buy them and now here is a black man showing up with a tractor and everybody around him is using mules. What is this? What is going on here? So they sent out the Klan and made that guy who owned that property sell it. Meaning... we had to go!

— John Grant

Growing up in North Carolina in those days, there's a little bit of everything from the Ku Klux Klan to hard work. ...When I was eleven and sharecroppin' and you don't know what [white] people have done against you or you have done against them. And the Klan would come and burn a cross in your yard. Then the boss man would come around and say, "I wonder who did that?" You see they were in that just as well ... they were the Ku Klux Klan. The ones you think weren't – were. From the cops all the way down. And if you [did] wrong, they would burn crosses. And if you said a wrong thing to the white folk, you got scolded. ... It was a terrible life ...until '50 [when] we moved....

— Deacon Joe Shipman



Deacon Joe Shipman

CHANGE

Most residents of Mt. Pleasant are aware of how much the neighborhood has changed over their lifetimes. Most speak of the differences with regret; others with resignation. Everyone knows that change is inevitable but all speak about how good it was “back in the day.”

Mt. Pleasant is gone. There will not be a Mt. Pleasant [in the future]. As the people of Mt. Pleasant get older, the kids don't stay. They get tired and frustrated. They move on. They'll move out of the house and a lot of times they don't come back. Like if their parents pass away, they're living somewhere else. They sell the homes. They contact the realtor. The realtors don't always put it on the market. They call one of the developers they're friends with and then that house is now gone. The houses get sold before we even know they are on the market. We don't know they're for sale until the sold signs [appear].

— Brian Baynard

I don't like the way [Mt. Pleasant] has turned out. One reason is because they have a lot of students living here now and it just has made a difference with, you know, those people having moved and with those students coming into those homes. It was a nice homey atmosphere and it was just wonderful bringing the children up because they would just play on the streets. There were few cars ... it was really beautiful. Mt. Pleasant was a beautiful, beautiful setting. Everyone [knew] everyone. ... Mt. Pleasant is special.

— Alice King



I think it's just important that the ones that come after us will know what it was really like – how our parents fought, struggled -- they and their little bit of pennies. [They] purchased the land here and built or had their homes built. And then nowadays there's a lot of young people. I can't fight them. They said they're not going to live here and I thought, well, everybody has their choice of what they want to do. They're buying homes everywhere else. Excuse me, but I think it does good to preserve. But I don't know how much longer it will be preserved after we're gone.... They'll sell everything and go. That's what I think. You'll come by one day and it'll be flattened, all the houses that are here. And you'll need a key or a code to get in. And you'll come in and say, "Now I think my house used to be here and Miss [Hall] used to live over here." ...

I know everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Everything is changing constantly. You just have to go with the flow.

— Jean Young

These excerpts from the oral histories show Mt. Pleasant residents' love for their community, their displeasure at some present events, and their concern for its future. They shared a lot of history and some amazing personal stories with their Cabrini interviewers. Beyond the history, the interviews also reveal the strong and generous spirit of the individuals and families who make up this Main Line neighborhood. They continually welcomed Cabrini students into their homes and into their lives. Their willingness and openness made these oral histories possible. The students were continually surprised at how friendly and welcoming the residents were toward them, despite the ongoing issues that the residents have had with students.

The words of John Grant reflect this community attitude of generosity toward others: "It makes no difference where they come from. People are people. I mean you're just a different color than I am. You bleed the same way I bleed. You sleep the same way I sleep. You got to eat the same way I got to eat. It's just that I am a different color than you. That's all. What's the difference?"

This oral history collection is a work in progress. These histories were gathered during the spring semesters of 2011-2016. Faculty at Cabrini University are hoping to expand this project across the Main Line to collect and preserve the history of the communities that often get overlooked by scholars. These oral histories are a gift from the people of Mt. Pleasant.

