

The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called “Baltimore’68: Riots and Rebirth,” a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore. They will ask you questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students. The students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them on the website, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.

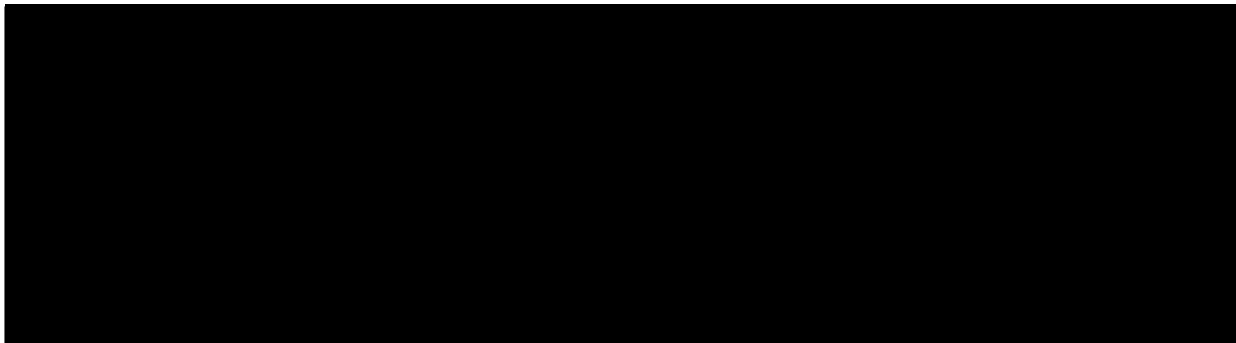
If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor
History and Community Studies
The University of Baltimore

I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.



Interview with Tom Brown

Maria: So ok, first of all please just state your full name

Tom: Thomas Brown

Maria: Ok and what was your situation in the 1960's, the I guess depending on how old you were the late '60s. Just where did you live or where did you work or go to school, or how old were you?

Tom: Well I was 10-20 in the '60s [laughter] is my age and I lived...

Maria: So you were a teenager in the late '60s?

Tom: Correct, yeah. High school and early college and I lived in Montgomery County, Maryland, Rockville, and went to school attended Western Maryland College, which is now McDaniel College, and graduated in '72 from there.

Maria: And where did you go to high school?

Tom: Robert E. Perry High School in Montgomery County, it's closed, closed up in '85, so I graduated in '68 from there. June '68.

Maria: '68. Alright so you were a senior in high school in 1968

Tom: Yes, yes.

Maria: Where did you, when you did your shopping, socializing, that sort of thing where did you go as a teenager?

Tom: Shopping and socializing?

Maria: Or just in your free time, how'd you spend your free time?

Tom: Wow, good question. I played high school sports, that was kind of the social hub for me, the same persons that played high school sports, then I, when I wasn't playing

sports, my parents were pretty adamant about if you're not doing something after school then get a job, so I worked at J.C. Penny's, selling shoes through high school too.

Maria: In Rockville?

Tom: Yeah. Twin Brook Parkway.

Maria: Is that part of a shopping centre?

Tom: Yeah, yeah. It was what Congressional shopping centre, I think there's a Fresh Fields there now, it's changed over there, but yeah.

Maria: Great. And before the riots and the years before the riots what kinds of interactions did you have with people of other races?

Tom: I went to a pretty predominantly white high school; we had maybe a handful of black students in our high school. We had, I don't know if you're looking for that, we had a, you know, a high proportion of Jewish students too, but we had a mixture, we were all kind of suburban kids but there was a kind of an enclave in Rockville called Manor Country Club. Those kids were fairly well to do, like if you got an opportunity to go to one of their houses, oh my goodness, they all lived on a golf course, it was kinda cool. So minimal exposure to you know kids slash persons of other races really.

Maria: What about outside of school?

Tom: It no, you know, it was very little, very little. You know unless you took the bus down to DC or whatever but it was very little interaction in the '60s.

Maria: So how would you describe the overall racial mood in your area, your neighborhood in Rockville?

Tom: Ambivalent? [laughter] I don't know if that hits it.

Maria: That's fine. And so what do you remember about the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King?

Tom: I was actually on a bus being transported, I was on a, it was either Trailways or Greyhound, I can't remember it was one of the two. I was on my way to Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, we got off for a stop and somebody had said Martin Luther King has been shot and you know, everybody kind of on the bus was like oh my goodness, you know, I wonder what's gonna happen now, uh-oh or stuff like that. That was kind of the reaction that I recall and I believe it was a Friday.

Maria: It was a Thursday

Tom: Thursday, okay. So I was staying the weekend and while at the school, going through the recruitment process, I didn't hear anything. It really wasn't, you're kind of in you know, a college campus where you know, you're kinda sealed off. I didn't see any TVs or anything like that, anything going on.

Maria: So you were doing like a campus visit cause you were thinking of going there?

Tom: Correct. Well they were recruiting me for football and so you know it was very busy, doing stuff.

Maria: And how did you hear about the riots starting?

Tom: I heard about the riots basically coming in to Baltimore, even though I took the bus out of DC, it went through a terminal in Baltimore, down in Baltimore city and I'm not sure where it was. I think it was on Howard St, but I don't know, I don't remember

Maria: But downtown?

Tom: It was downtown, heart of downtown. I wasn't from Baltimore, I knew nothing really about Baltimore, end up teaching 31 years in Baltimore you know, that's neither

here nor there. The first we saw it was on the bus coming in, I mean we saw fires, plumes of smoke coming up. I think the bus driver may, and I'm not sure of this, may have come over and just said hey there's some trouble going on just so you know and when we got into the terminal, military troops everywhere and guys you know, guns, you know, carrying guns and everything in the terminal itself and I couldn't get a bus out of there. I couldn't get a bus out of the terminal. I was stuck there. Cause no buses were coming in or going and so I called my parents, you know, hey I'm stuck here. I don't know who they called, they called somebody, and I get a bus, it was just myself and the bus driver and we went out you know through the city, hit route 40, Edmondson Ave, straight out Edmondson Ave, headed down to DC. I don't remember it being as bad in DC, coming into DC, but going out of Baltimore, the you know, the bus driver just said keep your head down. And I can remembering looking and kind of doing this [gestures as if ducking down] and it's just the two of us in this gigantic bus and just seeing like you know, gangs of guys breaking in, I saw this one liquor store on the right as you go up the hill on Edmondson Ave just breaking in and taking stuff. And you could see fires everywhere, not everywhere, you could see plumes of smoke going up like whoa, stuff like that.

Maria: So when you got, I guess when you got home, were the riots still going on? Did you watch any like news or how did you know about it once you got home?

Tom: Well, I mean obviously you saw it and then you got home and you know you just thought wow it's, I cant say that I was as socially aware of it you know. I was 17, you know, your concern more is probably for yourself and for not, the social awareness wasn't there for me at that point other than my mother was fairly adamant and fairly strong with her views regarding civil rights and stuff like that. She was very liberal, and

this has got to stop, blah blah blah like that, in terms of separate but equal nations and stuff like that. So that's kind of how I was raised.

Maria: But when you got home you didn't, you don't remember like trying to keep up on what was happening?

Tom: No, do not. It was kind of a crazy time back then. I mean it you know it, I can remember more like the 1967 Israeli war, just that being a big thing at my high school because we had you know a number of Jewish and they were wearing arm bands and things like that. And the same year our teachers are going on strike for...it's just a very, you know there was a lot going on, this was part of it. And then what happened you know just a couple of months later, it was RFK who was assassinated I believe, so it was real, Vietnam you know, I really hadn't hit the fan as much in terms of our awareness at that point at least in my life until I got to college. When I got to college in the Fall, it was you know, we went from, the ROTC was mandatory over there, if you were a male student, you had to take it.

Maria: At Western Maryland? Wow.

Tom: Yeah, you had no choice and a number of students fought that and won in the Fall of '68, so that's off of the subject of the riots. I may or may not have watched it on TV just to see what it was, I cant remember but I sure remember being in that terminal and you know looking around and it's like whoa, I mean it's just not a few guys you know, there was a you know, a ton of troops around that in securing that perimeter.

Maria: How did that make you feel?

Tom: Scared. Or what's going on? You know.

Maria: And did you, when you got to DC, did you, were you aware of the rioting in DC at all?

Tom: I was picked up, I don't remember, I think if I recall correctly, I never went into DC, they dropped me off in Silver Spring, which you know where it is, it's you know a suburb and that's where they picked me up. So I didn't actually go into the city, I went down there to get the bus to go to the terminal down in DC but I didn't get dropped off there on the way back.

Nyasha: From your time, like you said you taught in Baltimore for a few years?

Tom: I married a girl from Baltimore and yet I knew nothing about the Baltimore at all, I was all totally DC

Nyasha: So knowing about it now, do you remember what neighborhoods were affected or like, what you saw when you were on the bus, do you remember more of it?

Tom: I know that neighborhood now, I know what neighborhood it is because we ended up living very close to it, just on the outskirts and raised our daughters there. It was Edmondson village area on Edmondson Ave, you know it's near the junction with, what's that parkway, Hilton Parkway, very near Hilton and Edmondson Ave parkway, is where I saw right up close you know, some groups of guys, I didn't see any ladies or I didn't see any, looked like young guys to me.

Nyasha: Do you remember any violence occurring or anything?

Tom: Breaking glass, breaking the front, running through, coming out through the you know, not through the door, carrying cases of, no violence on humans, but violence on the building and somebody's you know business.

Maria: Do you remember seeing the National Guard there?

Tom: Out there? No. The National Guard seemed to be in, no, I saw no police out there at all, zero, it just looked like the world was running wild in there.

Maria: And when you got home to your neighborhood, were the people talking about it? Did you notice that the mood had changed at all in your neighborhood?

Tom: None that I remember you know. It was the suburbs of DC and it, I felt no, you know, did not feel threatened, did not feel like wow I hope it doesn't come out here. Didn't feel that way at all so...

Nyasha: Did you know at the time that, just going back, that the National Guardsmen didn't have any bullets in their guns?

Tom: No.

Nyasha: No? Do you think it would've made a difference on how you felt?

Tom: Yeah I would've been more scared if I had known [laughter]. I, yes, I'm sure I wouldn't have been as like whoa, what's going on here.

Maria: I guess we would normally ask how do you think Baltimore changed after the riots but after you know, after that time, because the riots were you know of course not just in Baltimore, did you think that your neighborhood changed or that your interactions with people of other races changed?

Tom: I don't, I can't say...

Maria: And not necessarily immediately after, I mean looking at years after

Tom: No. I don't see a negative, at that time I didn't see a negative, you know, a negative or a positive outcome, I can't say that at that age that I was really aware of any you know social outcome, be it negative or positive, I can't recall to be honest with you.

Nyasha: Is there anything else about the times of the riots that you remember?

Tom: The bus ride was scary, real scary

Nyasha: Going into the city or out of the city?

Tom: Out of the city cause it was just myself and the bus driver and the bus driver's telling me to keep my head down, it's like whoa

Nyasha: Was he African-American?

Tom: You know I don't remember. I don't remember.

Maria: Also what happened to everybody else who was on the bus with you who came to Baltimore?

Tom: You know I think, I think I don't know, but I think that was their destination and I may have been the only one going to DC and that's why it was, how are we gonna get him out. Were it not for the riots, possibly there would be more movement from Baltimore to DC but because of the riots, possibly it was well shut down and nobody was traveling but I needed to get down there and it wasn't apparently I could not get picked up in Baltimore city by my parents coming up or something.

Nyasha: So you said you didn't have that much social awareness, but when MLK died did you ever think you know something horrible was gonna occur or did you just think oh, this is horrible but you weren't thinking maybe something was gonna come out of it.

Tom: Correct. It's was more like that. I can't say it was like oh boy it's gonna be, I didn't think that at all, it was like oh that's terrible kind of, my goodness, they're shooting everybody. For persons my age, the Kennedy assassination is a big part of your growing up. That was a big part of just you know, cause they just put it in to the school PA system. Started playing the radio at my school, you didn't know what it was or why they were doing that and all of a sudden the president's been shot. That was a bigger thing,

especially where I was in DC, you know, then this, this was you know, another leader has been assassinated, it was kind of like that, it's like whoa where are we going, what's going on. No, I can't say as I thought it's you know, there's gonna be ramifications, I really couldn't of and I didn't think there was gonna be stuff going on.

Maria: Ok, well thanks

Tom: Just a suburban white kid, clueless, [laughter] that's kind of what it was.

Maria: Well thank you for sharing your story

Tom: Sure.