

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.

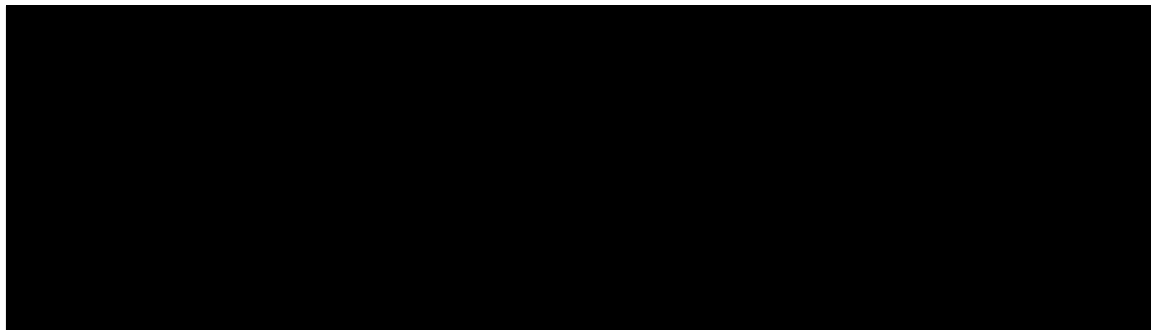
If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name 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 Conducted by Melody Campbell
Fall 2007**

An Interview with Kenny Dennis, age 15 in 1968

Melody: Ok, state your full name?

Kenny: Names, Kenneth Dennis

Melody: Uh, What was your situation in 1968? How old were you?

Kenny: I was fifteen in 1968

Melody: And where did you live?

Kenny: Intersection of Harford Road and 25th Street

Melody: Did you work at the time?

Kenny: No

Melody: Where did you go to school?

Kenny: 15...that puts you in Junior High- Herring Run Junior High
(Radio alert)

Melody: Before the riots, what kind of interactions did you have with people of other races?

Kenny: From school- I had a pretty good relationship with some of my classmates. Even got invited to their homes, first time, for them.

Melody: How would you describe the racial mood in Baltimore before the riots?

Kenny: Oh from a child's point of view- there was -areas you couldn't go into because you knew better. Oh, Herring Run was in an area that you weren't supposed to go into and that was at Moravia and Sinclair in 1968. It was a newness for what was going on up there. I think the school back then was pretty much a 50/50 composition of uh black and white students. But the area that the school sit in, that was pretty much 99% white. So you had to go through that area, and I walked to school then from 25th Street. I walked past Arch Bishop Curley and got in trouble with cat calls and threats. But no one ever did anything to me.

Melody: What do you remember about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Kenny: Sadness, shock, anger. And I could hold anger, boy. I carry a smile today, even back then I carried a smile, but I carried anger too. All I needed was a reason to release it and it would come out. I just felt like it would be easier to be nice to people, but I didn't always get it, I feel that way today. I try, I tell people the truth and they don't hear it, they don't want to hear it, they don't see the truth. With that I'm cast as a radical, racist, I'm just trying to tell them the truth. Well, I've got three more years in this job, then I won't have to worry about these people, I'll go to a new location and try to teach somebody else something new (laughs).

Melody: How did you hear about the riots starting?

Kenny: Probably news, uh yeah probably news, it didn't hit our area until later. Harford Road from North Avenue down to 25th Street was quiet until afterwards. Then people just had to repeat what they were seeing on TV.

Melody: During the riots, what information did you get and where did it come from?

Kenny: Information from radio, TV, from the soldiers that was marching up Harford Road. To that point I had wanted to be a soldier, that turned me off, I grew negative of the United States Military from that point on.

Melody: Why's that?

Kenny: The way they spoke to me. I thought they were there to keep me safe, they had a very bad way of showing it. I grew up wanting to be a Green Beret, then I said to hell with it and take that flag and shove it. Those days formed me, my attitude changed about a lot of things. I kept my smile, but the anger was always still sitting underneath, it still does, and I tell the truth and they don't want to hear it (laughs). And I laugh because I learned that I can be by myself and I don't need friends that don't understand my point of view. You've got to walk in a man's shoes to understand his point of view and a lot of these guys, they don't want to learn. They see it from their own point of view only.

Melody: When did you decide to become a firefighter?

Kenny: Happenstance, I came out of the Merchant Marines, I was hurt and I didn't want to go back on the water. So I applied for the job, I had an uncle in the job, he said 'come on,' so I thought I'd give it a shot. I took the federal job, state, the city came through. It's worked out. I raised three daughters in this job and I told them my truths, they're all well educated so they learned the other side of the coin also.

Melody: What are your impressions of the reporting of the riots?

Kenny: I think they were accurate, the reasoning behind them accurate. Did it make sense? No, because all they were doing was destroying their own areas where they lived at. But when tempers flare, people don't think straight. Sort of like the Jenna 6, isn't it amazing how they were all so quietly controlled, behaved. Beautiful, Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been proud.

Melody: How do you think the national news portrayed the situation in Baltimore?

Kenny: In '68?

Melody: uhuh.

Kenny: I'm 15, so I don't have accurate knowledge to know how they operate. If they operate like they do today, they follow a line that the other news teams set. Very few reporters are mavericks and go find out on their own to put an opposing point of view, I miss those type of reporters. They call them trouble makers, but they get the truth out, sometimes they get fired.
(Radio alert) I gotta roll.

Melody: Alright so you were talking about how the national news was portraying the situation in Baltimore and you were saying?

Kenny: Oh, they just all followed the same line that they get from the national and the local news in the field and very few reporters do their homework and search out the real reasoning behind what was going on. Many were too afraid to venture out into it, you have very few mavericks like you do today. You have some reporters that go out there and put their neck on the line, back then I don't think they did, but then I was 15 you only heard what they spoke. People need to thin of how those years- and back then I'm 15 so give a 10 year gap between 15 and 25- young men that was going through that time, how it affected them. You become very angry and hateful, hate filled, or you can try to be a reason with people, or you could ignore it. I tried to reason, I kept my anger in check until someone did something to me, after that it came out easily, very easily. And even those friends I told you about, I told them how I feel, I said if you can accept me on those premises then you are my friend and if you can't, take care, be well, get lost. I didn't believe in hate, I had too many white friends to believe in hate, but I held anger because America was not doing right. Hell it still isn't. Do you know after the Jenna 6 affair that happened, there was a young lady in West Virginia that was raped, brutalized, made to eat feces, it never made national news- but OJ Simpson did- by six white people, three men, three women abused this woman, never made news- OJ- that's this country- and its on the internet if you ever want to find out about it. No news, and that woman's in the hospital, she

survived, made to eat feces, raped by women, cut, hair pulled out, that's not newsworthy. I look at the um the similarities in this world and Notre Dame has lost five in a row, if that black coach was still at Notre Dame they'd be begging to get his head out of there, not coach White, ain't nobody talking about it, and I say look at that, but I'm a bad guy for bringing it up (laughs). I just laugh, same situation if a black coach wasn't doing it and they'd say get him out of there, and I just watch, and if I bring it up, I'm wrong, that's America, the great country. America is so color invested we fear it, hate it, ain't never gonna welcome it, I'll be dead before they do, I hope my children fair a lot better. I'm just going to enjoy this life I have, just leave me alone, that's what I tell people, and I'll keep my smile until someone do something to me, then my anger will come out. Because it's all sitting there in the background, waiting. And I laugh because that's the way I am.

Melody: What was your impression of the neighborhoods that were affected by the riots?

Kenny: Saddening. Frightening. Hell, I was afraid to go into those areas. In fact I think over on Pennsylvania Avenue back in those days, I would be afraid to go in there. Hell, at night I'm still afraid to go over there and I'm a grown man (laughs). You've got to be looking to your right and your left. I don't want to go through life doing that, nobody wants to. And anybody that's trying to work on getting their life straight doesn't want to go through such things. But they're not all black people that's doing it and I think the country doesn't see that. They include them all in one bunch. I'm surprised that the Supreme Court man is not regarded that way. I don't know his name.

Melody: Clarence Thomas

Kenny: Yeah, let Clarence Thomas walk down the street. They'll think, what's that – doing here? Not Chief Justice Thomas, cause that's all they will see, its just ignorance. You walk behind people still, and I laugh,
(Radio alert)
for what they say of me, I wear my Fire Department shirt just so it will allay fears of people when they look at me.
(Radio alert)
And they're wrong. What else?

Melody: What was your impression of the types of violence that were occurring?

Kenny: That was occurring?

Melody: Yes

Kenny: I, I think there were, not sure. Because I don't remember, I assume there were deaths during that time and I know there had to be assaults. When people

go crazy they will do anything to steal, and to protect their stealing they will hurt you. Sort of like Louisiana during that hurricane with civilization's deadly curse, civilities do not exist. Why do you think people were just trying to survive, cops were running away from their jobs because they had families there. The rules of the game don't exist anymore so anything could happen. Seeing as how I was 15, in my house, family around, we weren't rioting.

Melody: What about the arrests at that time?

Kenny: When you're doing wholesale arrests, I believe some people are innocent. But from the police point of view, the National Guard, you've got to group them all together to make peace in the area and then decipher who was doing what. I understand that concept. But for the person that's getting arrested, if he wasn't doing anything, all he feels is the unjustness of it, for being included because he was there. It's a two way street.

Melody: How did the presence make you and your neighbors feel?

Kenny: I don't know about my neighbors, I already told you what their impression was on me. They pulled me away from the American dream, they didn't help me believe in it.

Melody: What about your family, the rest of your family?

Kenny: I've never spoken to them about it. No, and I had two older brothers who probably had to go to work through the curfews. They never said anything. My brothers would just tell me about life up here because they worked up Harford Road and back in '68 you didn't comfortably go past Alameda without going into no man's land, and if you crossed Cold Spring Lane/Moravia, you definitely was in no man's land and yet that's where they worked at, and the comments came from the white people in the area when they would see them. But my brothers, they made it through without getting into any trouble. They picked the right brother, because I had the anger, I would have said something back, and to this day I say things back and make the confrontation (laughs).

(Radio Alert)

God was watching over me, He still does, because I still have that attitude. I don't mind dying I just want to take somebody with me that deserves it. So, I've been kept out of harms way all these years because I am a good natured person with anger in check. I perfect on how I keep anger in check and I read people I read them really good.

Melody: What was the mood in your area during the riots?

Kenny: For those that wanted to loot, opportunistic. For those that wanted to start trouble, that's all they wanted to do. For those that wanted to work and just be safe, they wished for the trouble to go away. Back in those days, that was

pretty much a family oriented area, it really was. I had fun growing up there. I don't even recognize that area now. It really went downhill. I knew a lot of the people, and the kids would all play together. But after we got older, we changed. And some went right, some went left and you would see them in the street and you would see that they became thugs. Yet they looked at you and they remembered when you were kids and you were safe with them. Oh, help the guy that didn't know them though, you was in harms way. I'm glad I got out of there safely.

Melody: How did your life and activities change during the days of the riots? You said there was curfews?

Kenny: Curfews. I think it was um, unless you had proof of reasoning, 7:00 that you had to be in, definitely before dark. Unless you had a substantiated reason, and at your job you had to have a written note. I remember, proof that you had to be out, or coming from work to be out on the street at that time. But the kids, it didn't affect us that much, we were just glad to be home. You could have closed school up and kept us, we were happy with that.

Melody: Did you still have to walk to school at the time?

Kenny: Yes, I walked to school because I saved three dollars a week bus fare and that was big money to a kid back then. I used that to buy anything else I want, and it was a straight shot because once you walked down 25th Street you were into Sinclair Lane and Sinclair Lane takes you straight into Herring Run. You just sing a song and walk.

Melody: Were you afraid to walk through white neighborhoods at the time?

Kenny: Only when someone said something to me. No you walk past the graveyard, very serene, small bit of curb there for cars, to make sure you don't get hit. Once you hit Erdman Avenue you're at Arch Bishop Curley and by the time you get past that, if no one has said nothing to you, you're home free because everyone is walking towards Herring Run.

Melody: How do you think that Baltimore changed after the riots?

Kenny: Directly after?

Melody: Yes.

Kenny: More resentment, more exodus from the city. The city was financially turning down because people took their money and went out into the county. You can go back that far to see when it started going down hill. And Tommy D'Allesandro was mayor, maybe, you do all you can, but you ain't got the tax base and you're left with the lower income people supplying the tax base you beg

the state. That's when the begging to the state for more money started. And what do poor people do? Poor, ignorant people go, they go further down into despair and only the lucky ones work hard to get out, and most of them, when they get out they stay out they don't come back. Who wants to come back into drudgery? You get a family you want to put them in the good life, I understand that. It wasn't such a bad idea that if you had to work in Baltimore City, you had to live down there but you could make it work like these people did a while back. That way you kept your tax base, your money in the city, if you could pull it off. Or as New York does, you make people who work in the city but live out they pay tax for working in the city and that way you get some of that money back in the city, New York was smart. The City of Baltimore couldn't pull that off. You're surprised I knew that ain't you?

Melody: How did your immediate neighborhood change?

Kenny: I don't think it changed that much when I was 15, there was no destruction on our street or on the block where we lived so that didn't affect us. And I don't think there was that much of an exodus, at least none that I would notice right off.

Melody: It wasn't until later that it changed?

Kenny: It was later. I guess I got there when I was ten so the riots happened five years later and that block was pretty much a 50/50 situation. At 15 one of my best buddies was a white guy that lived two doors up, he became a cop and I came in the Fire Department, and then he went off. On our block it was irrelevant, they were all established people so they were old, the kids were grown, my buddy and I we were the young kids and we stayed buddies until we became adults, and then he made a family and he went his way and I rarely saw him again except passing in the street as a cop. I think he's retired now, he's gone. A good memory, and the good memories won't allow you to hate because there's certain people that keeps you from doing that. You can be angry, you just can't hate.

Melody: In your experience what businesses were affected?

Kenny: Short-term or long-term?

Melody: Both

Kenny: Markets were out of business for a while

Melody: What type?

Kenny: Markets? Supermarkets. So they went after them. Department stores. You see them put up, it was probably the beginning of iron bars over the

windows, the steel door that came down, just in case. It took a while for normality with people to kick back in. Fear, fear lasted a long time and it still does I guess. In fact to some extent it always will be, until this country gets it right. So it's going to be a long time. It's amazing this country won't chuck up their hands and welcome foreigners before they do black people. They are so pitiful black people, hateful, it's amazing.

Melody: Did your interactions with people of other races change after the riots?

Kenny: Oh, no. You see my smile, I haven't lost a stroke. Have to keep them because a friend is a friend, and we got that. Like I said once we talk openly about things. I could never understand how a black man can become a republican, their ideals haven't changed, not that they're wondering. Just because you made a little money, yeah I know you want to keep it, being a republican will get it for you. I also couldn't understand why, when you've been mistreated as most black people have, why you would become the mistreater. Did you not yearn for your overseer to stop doing what he was doing? Why would you become him? And I see such parallels in business and in this job, when you get some rank why would you become just as nasty as the guy that you hated when he was over you? And I just watch. Thank God I've got enough years that I don't have to worry about such things because I'll say what I want to anybody. But in life either you want to change it so that it doesn't happen or you become the same person that was doing the hurting and I can't understand why people, black people would do such a thing. For 400 years its been perpetrated against us, I try to be fair with people, I try to make people at ease, and sometimes my smile makes people think they can take advantage of me and then I have to bring out the anger and then I'm bad. But they made me go there because they think they can take advantage of my nice easy going nature. A smile is supposed to make people feel good. The devil comes in many disguises, but you ain't seen the devil in me until I bring it out (laughs). I found it a lot better to be nice to people than the reverse, I think in the long run you win.