

*Interview of David Ettlin*

This interview is conducted by Sunni Khalid of WYPR

The transcription of this interview is provided by Nate Plutzik and John J. Schwallenberg

**Khalid:** I am speaking with...

**Ettlin:** David Michael Ettlin

**Khalid:** And in 1968, April 1968 where were you?

**Ettlin:** Well I was sitting in a window on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor news room at the Baltimore Sun scouting out fires on the distant horizon for the reporting staff of the paper.

**Khalid:** Ok, what do you remember about that? You were on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor in the old news room, what was your position at that time?

**Ettlin:** I was an editorial assistant at the paper, it was a part time job while I was getting through college thinking that I was going to be a teacher instead of a journalist of course I found out otherwise because news became bit of an addiction. And basically they needed somebody to just spot the chaos that was going on in the east side of Baltimore that was the view that we had from the news room was towards the east. And the one that I distinctly remember it was almost like a fireball, there was a huge explosion that turned out to be a dry cleaning plant up on Harford Avenue, and it became a general alarm fire. They stopped sounding alarms on some of the fires because frankly they were just burning out of control. The fire department couldn't get to all the fires that were being set here and there in corridors through largely black parts of the city but not entirely. There was still a lot of white business along the Gay Street corridor and most of them were wiped out by the rioting.

**Khalid:** What do you remember about the mood of the city? You remember hearing about the Dr. Kings assassination on Thursday, April 4<sup>th</sup>, you were at work or you were at home or where were you?

**Ettlin:** More than likely I just saw it on television, but I was not actually a news reporter at the time, although I was an assisting person in the news room so I knew that I would be involved with whatever was going on. The mood of the time was kind of curious because I think you have to look at Baltimore now to get a sense of then. The now is: That I don't think there is an issue in Baltimore politics or any aspect of life in Baltimore that does not seem to have a racial component to it. And I think that is kind of amazing. 1968 was very different time; the 1960's we had seen block busting in which people preyed on racial fears to try to make money in real estate.

**Khalid:** Now you grew up in Park Heights?

**Ettlin:** Yeah, I grew up new St. Ambrose Church we were about a mile from Pimlico race course. The street that I grew up on was in the early 1960's entirely white, that was my experience I lived in a white neighborhood...

**Khalid:** Mostly Jewish...?

**Ettlin:** Mostly Jewish. On my street the next street over seemed to be mostly Catholic even though my street was closer to the Catholic Church. The school I went to, Louisa May Alcott School Number 59 at Reisterstown Road and Keyworth Avenue was entirely white when I went there. I graduated from that school in 1957 and that was the year that the first black student came in. And, as I went through the public school system for the next three years I was at Pimlico Junior High School which is now Pimlico Middle School, except they're closing it. And there are an increasing number of black children who are going to that school. I had my first African American teacher there. And by the time I got to City College, maybe, that was 1960-1963, I was there. There was an increasing representation of minority students. So I saw a city that was changing while I was going through school. And I never thought of it in color terms, you know the guy who sat next to me, he was black and he was my classmate, and he was my pal and we talked, and I didn't understand there was a racial aspect of things. But as I became a journalist, first as an editorial assistant and then as a reporter, I was exposed to the problems people seem to have dealing with racial issues. In Baltimore there were just a lot of strange things going on beyond block busting.

**Khalid:** Well explain the phenomenon of blockbusting to me and what you saw growing up in Park Heights?

**Ettlin:** Well in growing up at a time when real estate speculators were trying to panic people in neighborhoods that were on the cusp of change. They wanted people to believe that black families were moving into the neighborhood and that consequence of that was that the value of their property would decline, that now is the time sell before your house drops in value by half. And they would find someone who was selling their home and they would put on a sign on the front lawn, they would mark it that particular property through the Afro-American news paper rather than any other media, they would try their best to get a black family onto a block that was all white. And as that happened, then they would increase that pressure on other property owners that "you should sell your house now" and a couple other signs would appear it was like mushrooms on front lawns that there would be for sale signs, and they would offer money for houses and probably either turn them around pretty quickly in resale or they would turn into the hands of people who were turning them into rental properties. And maybe it was self fulfilling prophecy, but for awhile prices did decline in these particular houses and the people that bought them got them at pretty good prices. The lower the price the bigger the profit margin when you start turning them into rental properties, and a neighborhood that was almost entirely home ownership became mixed between home ownership and rentals. And it wasn't a race thing it was a socio-economic thing that over a gradual period of time the neighborhood became poorer. And, people did not have the same investment in their properties and so the properties tended to decline a little bit. It doesn't happen overnight that a landlord doesn't fix up something that breaks in a house, doesn't invest in the property to keep it up but just tries to take maximum dollars. And if you drive around the neighborhood where I grew up...

**Khalid:** Like we did...

**Ettlin:** My street is still pretty intact, but there are other streets where rows of houses that used to be there are now vacant lots.

**Khalid:** Would we have seen those in 68 driving in there?

**Ettlin:** No, in that neighborhood it was largely untouched by the mayhem that followed the King assassination.

**Khalid:** OK now you had...What was the interaction, well was there any social interaction between black kids and white kids, black families and white families, because Baltimore has always been regarded as the northern most southern city and the southernmost northern city?

**Ettlin:** Well not that I perceived, I remember in the mid 1960's I came home and my parents were away and I had a friend who was black, and I just brought him over for a visit, he was an acquaintance of mine through some art circles that I was hanging out in while I was an idealistic artsy college student. And I noticed neighbors peering out the window because there some black guy who was going into my house. And I thought that was a little bit eerie, and it kind of represented to me, the fear that people had, that something was going on here that there was something to be afraid of here, which, it was a strange feeling that your neighbors think that way.

**Khalid:** Did they say anything to you?

**Ettlin:** No never a word. I don't even know that they ever asked my parents what was going on there. But I could see people looking through their window shades trying to figure out: "who's that going into the Ettlin house?"

**Khalid:** How segregated was the city? Because I understand Hutzlers, May Company, Hecht Company, if black people went in, couldn't eat at the cafeteria, they couldn't try on clothes, any garments they had to buy them, you know it was sort of what obtained in some of the other major cities.

**Ettlin:** I'm not aware consciously of when that started to change, those kinds of policies. I'm sure it had to have been by the early 1960's because there were civil rights movements in the air in the early 60's when the Freedom Riders came to town. When they had mass arrests at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park, which was an all white amusement park. The owners of that park said that they weren't going to let black people come in there because white people would stop coming. And in a sense of self fulfilling prophecy when they finally changed their policy a lot of white people did stop going to the park and they ultimately went of business.

**Khalid:** What year was this? When we had the Gwynn Oak?

**Ettlin:** I think it was about 1961 when they had the demonstrations at Gwynn Oak Park.

**Khalid:** Do you remember those pretty well?

**Ettlin:** Well yeah. A friend of mine who lived on Liberty Heights Ave. and I went down there on my bicycles and we sat on a wall across from the park and watched people being arrested and loaded into yellow school buses for civil disobedience as they were trying to just block the park, to shut it down in some way.

**Khalid:** What were the conversations that going on in your neighborhood, you know, during this time? What was the general tenor of the reaction among a segment of the white community to what was going on?

**Ettlin:** I am not really aware of it. I didn't have a lot talk with the adults in the neighborhood I was just a kid going to high school. And, you know as events were swirling around me I wasn't that conscious of social change beyond that what I could perceive from my own experiences of suspicion that people had and fears. I was very aware of the gradual changing demographics in schools but that wasn't a troubling thing.

**Khalid:** You couldn't see the racial situation sort of look like I was in Detroit where you could cut the tension with a knife and that you knew that some sort of confrontation that was...

**Ettlin:** No. And again this is before I got involved with the newspaper, and my travels around the city were not huge, even when I was in college until I became involved with the newspaper work and I started seeing other parts of town and seeing what was happening, that I lived in a very isolated world and I think that a lot of people in Baltimore did.

**Khalid:** What was your first inclination that something major was going to happen after Dr. King's assassination?

**Ettlin:** Well, there were other cities that had problems first and I remember that they're immediate concern in city government and of course you could feel in the news room you'd get a sense of what people were talking about, that, would Baltimore be next? You know, would problems break out in Baltimore and then the first fires started happening and reports looting, and for a couple days things were very much out of control in Baltimore.

**Khalid:** Were you out in the street?

**Ettlin:** Not as part of my work, I was lucky enough because I had a newspaper job that I had a little pass that I could drive around town that got me through any curfew restrictions. So a neighbor of mine who was a photographer and was interested in taking some pictures, so we drove around in my Karmann Ghia Convertible, and she was able to take pictures of national guardsmen driving around in jeeps, or the tent encampment in Clifton Park where they had the soldiers bivouac, and there were thousands of national guardsmen, national guardsmen who are in Baltimore trying to restore order and it was just a couple of days but it was a couple days of chaos and there are neighborhoods in Baltimore that have never recovered from that.

**Khalid:** What do you remember about the immediate aftermath? I mean was it just sort of like... Were people just sort of stunned or despondent or what?

**Ettlin:** I think stunned is the better word because there was a lot of damage to Baltimore not the infrastructure that was truly a part of the white society, but neighborhoods that were on the edge that were in poverty, they were still livable neighborhoods and then suddenly there were vast numbers of buildings that had been burned, businesses that were shuttered and that never reopened and that has to change how a neighborhood functions and the Gay Street corridor never, never came back from that. The lower Greenmount Ave. corridor you still see signs of what happened in 1968, where when businesses reopened the architecture of the buildings changed.

**Khalid:** Tell me some more about fortress architecture?

**Ettlin:** Fortress architecture is where you once had glass windows and instead you had like these block glass window inserts that don't open they're like bricks of glass, or you saw iron bars over windows and you had metal doors that fold down over entrance ways when they close for business. And its all designed to defeat break ins, fire bombs, there were a lot fire bombings in Baltimore back in that period of time. You don't hear about people throwing Molotov cocktails much anymore, but there was big concern over things like that. And at least among, I think, white Baltimore where people had businesses in areas that were changing, where they perceived that there was danger you were more apt to see fortress architecture happening.

**Khalid:** Was there an understanding of the rage in the black community among the white community? Because Fraser broke it down like this, he says you know black Baltimoreans when this time talk about the

assassination of Dr. King although many whites look at it as the time of the riots. So it's almost like there's this difference seeing the same event differently.

**Ettlin:** I don't think you can separate one from the other, there was such outrage across the country that this had happened, although I suspect that Dr. King thought that it could happen judging by his words that preceded his assassination. White America, I can't speak for what anybody else thought at the time, I wasn't surprised the riot happened in Baltimore after I saw it break out in other cities.

**Khalid:** Why not?

**Ettlin:** I expected it I knew there was just a vast black population in Baltimore, and that there was probably in many neighborhoods increasing despair over economic conditions. I was teaching actually that year as a student teacher in Towson State. I was a specialist in urban education; I was in a Ford foundation teacher training program called "Project Mission" and I was the idealistic white teacher working in an all black school. As I said the job at the Baltimore Sun was part time to help pay the rent but my main focus was teaching at Clifton Park Jr. High School which was just on the edge of Clifton Park near 25<sup>th</sup> Street and Harford Rd. And literally it was 100 percent black public school, it was a re-segregated school. For a time it had black and white kids and then it was all black. And when the riots were over and the kids came back to school there were a lot of them who had new clothes, and I knew for a fact that those clothes weren't bought but it was stuff that had been taken out of the front windows of stores in the neighborhood. Below Harford and 25<sup>th</sup> there was a vast area that was just destroyed or heavily damaged by the rioting. And some of that came from that

**Khalid:** A couple of questions on the news room, do you remember any black reporters with the Sun in '68?

**Ettlin:** Well, no, not for the morning paper and I'm not sure what year the first African American reporter joined the Evening Sun. I know that the job, well actually there was one African American reporter at the morning paper at that time; because he had been an editorial assistant when he was promoted to reporter I got his old job as the editorial assistant.

**Khalid:** Do you remember his name?

**Ettlin:** I'm thinking, I don't want to get it wrong so...

**Khalid:** What do you think that said about the Sun or other institutions? Mainstream media institutions?

**Ettlin:** If you look back in the clippings in the Baltimore Sun, the old pre-mid 60's clippings in the library and you look up a name, and it may have like Robert W. Johnson comma Negro. That there would be a racial designation in the clip file that would show there was a distinction made between people. That it wasn't just a name it was part of the identification that came after it. And racial identification seemed to be important to people. That changed, and by the time I was a reporter that was done, you didn't identify people as Negro.

**Khalid:** But before '68?

**Ettlin:** I'm not sure what year they stopped doing it stylistically but certainly into the early 60's you'll still find clippings where people were identified that way.

**Khalid:** But you essentially had white papers or a white paper, and Black papers staffed by African Americans.

**Ettlin:** Yeah there was not an integrated newsroom in the early 1960's in Baltimore. And again that was something else that also started to gradually change that there became a consciousness of diversity in newspapers and there became an increasing minority presence. And as that opened up opportunities in journalism you also saw a lot of turnover among African American journalists that they would move from paper to paper and better themselves because you could start at the Baltimore Sun and there was demand for you at the NY Times, or the Wall Street Journal. And I think one of the problems in keeping journalists is that there is an opportunity for them to move up and out.

**Khalid:** How do you think that affected the coverage of the riots in the aftermath in not having a significant African American reporting or editorial presence?

**Ettlin:** That's hard to say I'm sure it would have been easier to be in the black community and get a better sense from the street up as to why things had happened. But that was certainly looked at and from at least through talking to black leaders who reporters did talk to and did know that a lot of that came out in the coverage that followed the riot.

**Khalid:** How has the city changed for the better? How has the city changed for the worse since 1968?

**Ettlin:** Boy, that's a broad question...

**Khalid:** I know but you're a man with a broad mind...

**Ettlin:** And I'm a man who hasn't lived in Baltimore City for a quarter century I moved to the suburbs eventually.

**Khalid:** Why?

**Ettlin:** Just raising a family and wanting a house that had a big piece of property around it, and there is something nice about suburban living in terms of raising of family, you have a little more room around your houses, the schools are better, well in some cases, some neighborhoods in suburbia you could say were better. Baltimore has changed to the extent that you are seeing a repopulation by whites. But the areas that they are coming back to are close to the water, they're in the fashionable neighborhoods that are suddenly becoming artsy and popular, but there are still vast sections of Baltimore that are extremely poor, that the houses are in terrible condition. The percentage of people, I don't know what the numbers are in Baltimore, who are homeowners is far different then it was in the 1950's and 1960's, and people don't have as much at stake in the house they live in unfortunately and I think that's still a problem that has to be dealt with. That it would be an ideal world if we could go back to being a city of homeowners, people who have a stake in their property, its upkeep, who feel like they are getting part of, I think there really is an American dream to be a homeowner and that vast, vast numbers of people are denied that.

**Khalid:** Segregation, race relations, better or worse than it was forty years ago in the city?

**Ettlin:** Race relations by and large I think are better, segregation, Baltimore is a re-segregated city because of so many neighborhoods that were abandoned by whites and that's the only explanation you can have for schools that are just about entirely African American.

**Khalid:** What would you say, race relations are better, why would you say they are better? What leads you to think that, better than they were in '68?

**Ettlin:** I don't perceive that people are as afraid anymore and I think that changes the way you deal with people. I think that everybody works next to what used to be the minority. And this is a majority black city now. I mean to call anything a minority it depends on where you are as to who the minority is; it's sort of a bogus word. But, race relations are part of the landscape now, we all deal with it everyday. We work with people of all manner of color and accept that. That's a vast change in society. I think the shame is that the schools have fallen on such hard times, that neighborhoods have not improved, that there is just vast economic disempowerment in a place like Baltimore, in big urban cities.

**Khalid:** Thanks