

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 Richard Friedman
; Baltimore, Maryland
Interviewer: John Schwallenberg
Transcriber: Nicholas Ricks and Nora Feinstein*

Schwallenberg: Testing, one, two, three. Can you just say something? Just anything...

Friedman: Testing, one, two, three.

Schwallenberg: Sounds all right, okay. This is John Schwallenberg, University of Baltimore conducting an oral history interview, Baltimore '68 Project. We are at 319 Dunstan's...

Friedman: St. Dunstan's Road.

Schwallenberg: St. Dunstan's Road. Can you state your record...or...name?

Friedman: Richard Friedman.

Schwallenberg: Thank you Mr. Friedman. Okay, Mr. Friedman, what was your situation in 1968? How old were you? Where'd you live, work, go to school, things like that, do your shopping?

Friedman: In 1968 I was employed by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services at the Maryland Children's Center. Maryland Children's Center was a diagnostic detention center for delinquent kids in Arbutus. I lived in the Govans area with my wife and two children, two young children. I had graduated from the University of Maryland School of Social Work in 1967 and was working out of the Maryland Children's Center at the time that the riots occurred.

Schwallenberg: Where did you do your things like shopping and things of that nature?

Friedman: Shopped on York Road, around the Northern Parkway area, primarily.

Schwallerberg: Before the riots took place what types of interactions did you have with people of other races?

Friedman: Well, I had worked at the Juvenile Court since I'd got out of undergraduate school. I started at Juvenile Court as a probation officer in 1962 and there were a considerable number of African American probation officers and social workers in the department of Social Services as well as at the Juvenile Court. I'd say probably... half the staff were people of color at the time.

Schwallerberg: Did you have any social activity with the folks of other races?

Friedman: Yes, mostly with people with work, at work, whether it was socializing with them at lunchtime there or after work talking about our families.

Schwallerberg: Uh huh. What was the racial mood in the city at that time?

Friedman: My recollection is that it was clearly a segregated city... with very dense population, a lot of poverty in poor communities. It had not yet become a well-integrated school system and it had not yet become a well integrated in neighborhoods but it was clear from the kids and families who came to Juvenile court and the kids and families who worked at Juvenile court that this was an issue that was going to be a major concern.

Schwallerberg: Did you feel any particular types of tensions between the races prior to Martin Luther King's assassination?

Friedman: Well, the only...the first experience with something like that was probably in 1963 when [activist H.] Rap Brown...came to Cambridge...and was, had been part of some disturbances in the Cambridge community. A man I was sharing an office with at the time had graduated from Morgan in 1962, I graduated from College Park in 1962. He was in the National Guard and was stationed in Cambridge at the time so that was about five years before the riots here in Baltimore and that was my...a wake up call, if you will, to what was going on in poor communities.

Schwallenberg: How did the middle-class blacks folks feel as far as racial issues?

Friedman: I don't think I can speak to that, I just don't recall.

Schwallenberg: Okay. I understand. What do you remember about the assassination of Dr. King?

Friedman: Well, I can remember it being, first of all, just a traumatic event for me, the family, the neighborhood, on television constantly. We have to sort of put this in context; at least I do, of having been traumatized by President Kennedy's assassination in '63 and of course later on with [the assassinations of] Robert Kennedy and Malcolm X. Four assassinations within a brief period of time which was very traumatic but I do remember watching and reading everything I possibly could about the assassination of Dr. King and I certainly had been aware of all the work that he had done in the March on Washington and his speeches there and his speeches all around the country, including the last one in Memphis.

Schwallenberg: How did you hear about the riots getting started?

Friedman: Probably on radio or television. I was commuting from my home in the Govans area to Arbutus at the time, working at that detention center, and I think that's how I'd had heard what had happened.

Schwallenberg: Okay. Where did you get most of your information regarding the disturbances from: television, radio, word of mouth?

Friedman: Radio and the newspaper.

Schwallenberg: How would you describe their coverage? Do you think it was sensationalized or was it fairly even-handed? From what you can remember.

Friedman: That was forty years ago...

Schwallerberg: Yeah, that's why I...

Friedman: I think it was a major, traumatic event for everyone in Baltimore. I don't know that it was sensationalized. I don't think there was an effort, if I can recall, in the early parts of it to wonder why it happened and what some of the causes might have been. But that's...that's what I can recall.

Schwallerberg: Uh huh. Did you recall any national news...?

Friedman: Oh sure. I remember hearing and reading about and watching on television riots in Detroit and Newark and Washington, D.C. and other places around the country that all were breaking out right after the assassination.

Schwallerberg: Were you... Did you see any of the neighborhoods that were affected?

Friedman: Yes and no... I had colleagues who worked at Johns Hopkins Hospital and I had... But I don't think I was driving through or to any specific neighborhood in going to work or coming home from work before the riots and then shortly after the riots started is a different tale.

Schwallerberg: When you say a different tale, how...?

Friedman: Well, the Dean of the School of Social Work [at the University of Maryland at Baltimore] at the time was Dan Thursz and he apparently signed some memorandum of agreement, if you will, or had an agreement, with the then Mayor D'Alesandro shortly after the riots started. And people were being arrested and confined at the Civic Center, the vast majority of them for curfew violations and City Hall and the Department of Social Services and other places around the city were getting calls from frantic family members wanting to know what had happened to their uncles and husbands and brothers who didn't come home from work or didn't show up at work and wanted to know what had happened to them.

So apparently, the Dean of the School and the Mayor agreed that a group of social workers could get to the Civic Center and interview various people who were confined there and make connections with the family to assure them that their uncles and brothers and husbands and everything were all right. And that's what I volunteered to do that. I remember leaving work out in Arbutus probably around four o'clock and driving to the Civic Center. I had a pass, I don't remember now whether it was a letter or a pass that was jointly signed by Mayor D'Alessandro and Dean Thurs[?] from the Social Work School that allowed me to be on the street past curfew time and I remember going to the Civic Center. I remember interviewing people at the Civic Center and trying to call relatives and friends to tell them that their...that the man that they were looking for, and they were primarily men, was okay, were okay. A lot of people were on their way to work to Sparrows Point, coming home from Sparrows Point, others were visiting friends and relatives at local hospitals and had been swept up in the curfew violations and they had no way of notifying anybody of what was happening. Most had gotten off of public transit buses and been arrested for curfew violations. So, I remember doing this for a couple of days with a group of social workers, I don't... I had graduated from social work school in 1967 so I was less than a year out from the Masters degree program. I don't remember how many of us there were but I remember leaving the Civic Center late at night – probably eleven, twelve o'clock at night – and driving from wherever I parked...down Pratt Street and turning left on either Charles [Street] or Calvert [Street], and at every corner – Lombard [Street], Baltimore [Street], Saratoga [Street] – all the...all the streets, at every corner there was somebody from the National Guard to check my ID. They were armed, there was usually a jeep with some soldiers in it and there were also tanks on the street at the time and it didn't matter if you had just been approved, having passed the first check point a block away, you had to stop at the next check point to show your identification. I think I went up as far as Mt. Vernon before that stopped, that sort of block by block review of credentials and the only credential I can think of that I had was my driver's license and this letter that had been signed by the Mayor and the Social Work School Dean. And...it was a scary time for everybody.

Schwallenberg: I can imagine. What... How did the neighborhoods look that you were driving through? Were...they seem to be intact?

Friedman: Eerily quiet. There was hardly anybody on the street except law enforcement and military. Very few, if any, people walking along as a normal walk to a corner store or just out on the street. It was just eerily quiet. That's...that's the one recollection I have.

Schwallerberg: How did it make you feel seeing the National Guard...out?

Friedman: It was very strange. It was hard to swallow that this was happening and had happened in the city that I was in, but I had also, as I said earlier, seen what was going on in Newark, or Detroit, or Washington, and other places and...same thing was happening there. It was just very strange that this had actually happened and it was surreal in a way because a number of people, including myself, just went to work everyday doing what you did whether you worked in a hardware school...hardware store or what, there was no quarantine in my community, I could get in and out of my community, but I do know of people off of Edmondson Avenue and Liberty Heights [Avenue] and others who were not able to get in or out of their community because of the National Guard barricades and so a number of people didn't come to work on those occasions and the rest of us just covered for them.

Schwallerberg: Mmhmm. Did you go down to the Civic Center just one day or were it multiple days?

Friedman: If I remember, and this was forty years ago...

Schwallerberg: Right...

Friedman: It was probably two, three, maybe four days of working at night and I don't remember whether we are...and our job wasn't finished but I don't remember what the circumstances were. It was probably no more than three or four days.

Schwallerberg: Was it... Was the situation at the Civic Center, was it orderly or was it chaotic?

Friedman: Total, total chaos. Just, what I remember is that hundreds and hundreds of people

being confined there, noise, disorder, confusion, people didn't know why they were there, when they were informed what they were there they just needed...didn't know when they could eat, where they could go to the bathroom, worried about parents and...and children of their own... It was total confusion. But we tried to make some order out of it.

Schwallenberg: Right.

Friedman: I also remember around this time the War on Poverty had started in many of the communities with community outreach people... and so there were a number of street workers, a number of ministers, a number of people in the community, working with families, trying to control the aftermath of the immediate riots and trying to put everyone back into an orderly frame of reference.

Schwallenberg: Now, do you think that, that a lot of... A lot of like the Kerner Commission [of 1968] and things of that nature had come out, do you think, from your perspective that the assassination of Dr. King was just a spark, was it already waiting to happen, the riots, or, how do you feel?

Friedman: Well, I don't think it was inevitable that Baltimore would break into riots. There was certainly enormous poverty and tremendous segregation and disparity in the city, but from my perspective and the people that I worked with and the people that I knew, I didn't sense that it was about to break out. I think the...the assassination itself certainly was a trigger—to have taken the life of someone who stood for non-violence certainly was an enormous trauma particularly in the African American community but also for me and many of my colleagues, too.

Schwallenberg: Mmhmm. Mmhmm... From...from the people that you talked to during that time did...who were, who were detained...it was majority of them were people just coming and going to work or did it seem like there were some legitimate cases from what you could tell?

Friedman: Well, from what I read on your website and the statistics, some obviously had been concern...been involved in destruction of property or theft. I can recall only talking with people

who had been arrested for curfew violations. As I said, they had people going to and from work, going to hospitals, going to stores, trying...just going about their business. I don't remember talking to anybody who had actually participated in any riot.

Schwallenberg: Were some of these folks even aware that the curfew was...in force?

Friedman: Some didn't know it was in force. I don't...other than to...to know that there were troops on the street and... an eerie quiet as I said earlier around parts of the city, I'm not sure that everybody had heard that there was a curfew. But even so, a lot of people, if you didn't go to work, you didn't get paid and so a lot of people were going about their business to go to work and just figured they could go to work without being arrested because they needed to keep working and it was a very strange experience to talk with some of them. Some of them truly didn't know why they were being held at the Civic Center and when were they going to be released and when could they get to work and when could they talk to somebody about what's going on. And we were, I guess, the link for some of them anyway, back to their families.

Schwallenberg: Was this all in the basement or throughout the whole building or...?

Friedman: I remember mostly in the basement, although there was on the main floor a...a barricade set up – I just...I just don't recall what...how people flowed in and out and how long they stayed or where we were located who were interviewing people. I don't... I can't even recall now how...whether we just walked out and started interviewing people or we were, suggested that we interview a group that was over in this corner of the building or what, I just don't recall...

Schwallenberg: Did they have makeshift courtrooms set up and things?

Friedman: No, I don't remember that if there was...

Schwallenberg: Okay.

Friedman: Yeah, but we just... We were brought in to help reconnect families, not to be

involved with the charges, not to be involved with the police view of whether somebody had been a participant in a riot or had damaged property or stolen anything.

Schwallerberg: How has your life changed? How did that change your life, those events?

Friedman: Well, it certainly was a wake-up call for a better understanding of the tremendous disparity in the city between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” and most of my professional and personal life in the Juvenile Court and in the community and with two young kids was looking towards the future and at least I had some hope of what the future might bring and I realized how much hopelessness so much of Baltimore’s population confronted in those years. And it sort of reinforced my idea that I wanted to keep working with people in the city and doing the best I could to try and make a difference.

Schwallerberg: Did you change from Arbutus to...to somewhere in the city or...?

Friedman: No, I stayed out in Arbutus until 1970, so another couple years at this detention center and I still was with the Department of Juvenile Services until 1971.

Schwallerberg: How do you think the riots changed Baltimore and the area?

Friedman: Well, housing and schools are still, in large part, segregated. I think there are communities that...there’s tremendous disparity still exists. There are certainly more opportunities for jobs and better education and healthcare and...that didn’t exist and there’s a whole lot more sensitivity, I think, in some communities to the differences that arise in the social and economic standpoint. But there’s still a long way to go to even up the playing field in Baltimore and most urban areas around the country. If I remember, Baltimore peaked in its population in the 1970 census over 900,000 and now we’re somewhere around 630,000 people, so a lot of people left, a lot of people were afraid... And I know today there are people who are afraid to come into the city. They come into the city to go to Camden Yards, and they come into the city maybe for a concert or go to Harborplace but... So there’s still tremendous disparity.

Schwallerberg: Mmhhh... Can you think of anything that was done in the immediate aftermath of the riots to try to promote healing in the city or...?

Friedman: Well, as I said earlier, I think the War on Poverty started growing in Baltimore, particularly, and a lot of Community Action Agency people were involved in that...outreach efforts in high poverty areas, high crime areas, to try and identify ways to help people stabilize their lives, improve job outlooks, etc. and I think that was an enormous difference. Head Start came along, food pantries came along, mentoring and job training programs came along, and a lot...it sort of spurred a lot of people, I think, to get involved in community action and with neighborhoods in distress. It caused a lot of people, whether they were politicians, or community activists, or neighborhood groups to take a look at what was going on in their immediate community but also take a look what the rest of the city was looking like at the time.

Schwallerberg: How about... How did the people...or did you notice any change in your neighborhood, the people in Govans; how they felt about the city, how they...how they felt about race relations, things like that?

Friedman: Ah, well, I guess there was a lot of discussion about it and a lot of people moved out and a lot of people moved in. We've stayed in the city and I've stayed in the city and a lot of my friends have stayed in the city but a lot of people left out of fear. And continue to live...the city continues to lose a lot of people.

Schwallerberg: Is there anything that I haven't mentioned that you think would be pertinent for this project or this discussion?

Friedman: Well, I hope you've talked to key people in community action agencies and particularly people who are active on the streets, trying to do what you suggested earlier about trying to make a difference in different neighborhoods and I could perhaps give you some names of people that might be helpful to talk with.

Schwallerberg: That would be great if you could. Okay? All right. Well, I thank you for your

time.

Friedman: You're welcome.

Schwallenberg: It was a pleasure.

Friedman: Thanks.