

# African American LEGACIES

Remembering Resilient Communities



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And of course, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge our 24 interviewees, whose stories paint a remarkable portrait of American life. Their willingness to share their histories has enriched us beyond measure.

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## DEAR FRIENDS,

“African American Legacies: Remembering Resilient Communities” gathers the recollections of 24 remarkable individuals. It includes those from both urban and rural backgrounds, from poverty and privilege. They are janitors, teachers, lawyers, professors, and government employees. But what unites them all is the unifying experience of a people and culture defined by community, family, and faith. For by and large, they were a group of people whose parents had come of age during the period of enforced American segregation – the era of Jim Crow. Thus, their community was a self-styled one, forged by its own members, preserved through dedicated work and devotion.

The interviews present the direct remembrances of a bygone community from those who directly witnessed it. Looking back across the decades,

these men and women describe a vast and diverse world – yet also one that held many similarities. It is these similarities – and the routines of love and tradition that bound a community – which emerge.

The interviews touch on the different aspects of the remembered African American community – its mores, cultures, and practices. We learn much about what life was like then, and we see a world that has largely passed on.

For in the fascinating stories of these men and women, there is a kind of elegy for a civilization at eventide – the last, late glimpse of a people who, facing impossible odds, built a world from scratch. By viewing these legacies, we who remain are invited to wonder for ourselves, and consider how we too, might make the world anew.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Hoda Mahmoudi'.

Hoda Mahmoudi  
Research Professor and Chair, The Baha’i Chair For World Peace



“I remember saying ‘Daddy can we stop and get ice cream?’, because there was a Howard Johnson’s that sold ice cream along the way. And my parents would just very calmly say, ‘Oh we can’t, we don’t have time, your Mom packed a lunch, we’ll get some ice cream when we get to Grandma’s.’ It was very low key, no big deal. I did not know, until I was an adult, that the reason we didn’t stop at the Howard Johnson’s was because we couldn’t, that we were not permitted. But I didn’t experience that directly, and I didn’t know it. I think my parents, intentionally, made an informal or formal pact with each other to say you know what, we’re going to act like everything’s fine. Which is what they did, and spared us the negativity.”

BRENDA BASS-ROPER



“There was definitely economic inequality, but when I was growing up – and this is what folks are often saying – good and bad – about integration. During the time I grew up, the teachers, the doctors, as well as the gardeners and everyone, lived in the same community because it didn’t matter if you were a teacher, you still had to live in a Black community. And now that there are options, you don’t have that diversity of economics, or cohesion.”

JUDY BELK



“I come from a lineage of people who fought. I come from a lineage of people who endured slavery and figured out how to make gospel out of it. I come from a lineage of people who were being lynched and figured out how to make jazz out of it. We are not the sum of the worst things that happened to us, we are the product of the best of our imaginations. We’ve lived through worse and came out better and we can again. There’s always hope, winter always turns to spring.”

JUNE CROSS





“My mother, she had a network of other mothers who had kids that we either went to school with, or we were in some kind of afterschool activity with. And all those women shared resources, whether it was letting you know about a free concert in the park, or a summer camp, or signing someone up for cheerleading or Pop Warner football – they just shared a lot of information amongst each other. And they also shared in the responsibility of taking kids to a museum or taking kids to the beach. We leaned on each other. We had this kind of support in our community, and we cared about each other. That’s how I grew up.”

KIMBERLY FREEMAN

You know what,  
we’re going to act like  
everything’s fine.



“What became different and what remained the same? I feel like the values were always the same. I feel very fortunate to have grown up in the family that I grew up in. There was lots of intellectual curiosity, there was a lot of fun. There were big personalities. A lot of love. I’m not sure that anything changed in terms of my values or anything. I held on. We had a wide worldview so there wasn’t this sort of narrow thing going on.”

ROBIN GREGORY



“Because I didn’t know that there were certain things I wasn’t supposed to do, I just went and I did them. So don’t let somebody else stop you, particularly since you know that you are descended from the first people on Earth. So you were the ones who were here first. Nobody should stop you. And who was it, I believe it was Martin Luther King who said, ‘Don’t walk stooped over, because nobody can get on your back if you stand up straight and do the best you can.’ So if you know your history, you can soar.”



GAIL HANSBERRY



“My grandfather was saying that for his life, he talked about Psalms 27: 10. It tells the story of a mother and father who forsake him – he didn’t know his father, his mother died and he was left alone. But God’s hand got him through life. And for the fact that he was a man that never went to school but was able to buy two acres or an acre and a half for each one of his children and build and have the houses built for all of them with no education. And it’s just mind boggling. I think about how much he accomplished. When we think about how much we try to get and what people strive to do. And he did it all with nothing other than the knowledge and the skills that he had.”

VAUGHN HOLSEY



“So we walked from Reverend Walker’s house. Nice little walk, maybe a couple of miles. Try not to be noticed, as it was a small group really. We walked to the library and we walked inside the library and we sat down and the librarian came over and told us we had to leave the library. So we still sat, kept reading, kept our heads down, ain’t pay them no mind. So she waited a while and after a while she called the police and so when the police chief came, he asked us to leave the library. Library was for white only and we were to leave. And so we still sat and then he says you’re under arrest. And so at that point he said get up, you’re under arrest. So we did, and so we went to jail and I actually stayed in jail about five hours, three or four hours or so.”

SANDRA HOWELL



“I think it’s just one of those very natural things. Fathers and sons have to have breaks. There just has to be that point where... My father was very controlling about things, you know, and he had his thoughts about the way I ought to be thinking or conducting myself. And it was the late 60s. I wanted to have a freer mind and a freer body. And I think my attitude, and it was probably very much selfishness on my part, but what am I, 17? Right? My attitude was, I’ve done everything you wanted me to do.”

CHANNING JOHNSON





“Our grandfather Williams, who, as I said, built a home on the West Side in 1951, could not do it until after restrictive covenants. So as he, in his own words said in 1937, he was building homes in places where he could not live – and he could afford to live there. But because he was a ‘Negro’ at the time, he came home to his comparatively small home. This was a man who was designing homes from that little house. And just the sheer strength and the will to do that.”

KAREN HUDSON



“Karen has her experiences. I have my favorite experience. Paul Williams takes me to lunch at the Polo Lounge, or Chasen’s, or Perinos, or Brown Derby, these are places kids never went. And so he takes me to the Polo Lounge... We finish lunch at the Polo Lounge. They bring the check to the table – Did he sign for it? – My grandfather signs the bill and we walk out. I was like, what? We can leave without paying? Yeah.”

PAUL HUDSON



“My message to young people is live out your dreams, don’t be frustrated, don’t give into the charlatans that are out here, but live out your dreams. Stay in school, get involved with your community. Join a church, join a girl scout or boy scout organization, join a youth group. Get involved with the nonprofits that are positive, get involved in your community. Be the best you can be. Keep the faith.”

TONY NICHOLAS



“It was the staple. It was where the gatherings were, it was one of the things that unified, I don’t want to say all of us, but there were friends I had at church that I only saw at church because we didn’t go to the same schools. It was similar to what we think about sometimes when we think of the big impression of a Dr. Martin Luther King. The King gatherings were in churches, and that’s where groups of black people felt safe, that’s where we felt connected, that’s where we felt God was present and therefore a direction in our lives.”

VANITA NICHOLAS



“One time, my sister Sharon and I went, and were told to just go in and order whatever kind of ice cream we wanted at the counter. And we sat at the counter, ordered it and the guy said we don’t serve you here. And so I ran out back to the car and said ‘Daddy, they’re not going to serve us.’ Daddy went in there and went behind the counter and talked to the guy. And I wish I’d had the kind of microphone they have here to hear what he said to him. But it was something to the effect that ‘You see those two children over there, you give them anything they tell you that they want and do it right now, and don’t let there be any question about it ever again if they come in here.’ And he came over and served us very nervously. And so that sense that even if we did face the color line, which of course, eventually, more and more we did, we had backup in the form of this community that included the school, included the Church, included family.”

ROBERT O’MEALLY

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“We went to a restaurant in downtown Texarkana, and one of the things that had happened is somebody told them that this was a nice soul food restaurant when they were there visiting relatives and stuff, so they went to the restaurant, and as it turns out, the owner was a white woman who used to be my grandmother’s playmate on the plantation that she grew up on. And she recognized my grandmother. And she said, all the food here, as long as you’re in town, you just come here and eat, you don’t have to pay for anything. So on the way back, my grandmother and grandfather were saying, you know, if we’d known how much things had changed, we might have come back to visit sooner. And so it was such a radical transformation. Texas had changed in ways that were beyond her imagination.”

VIRGIL ROBERTS



“It was clear that what we were going to do was be educated. Period. We grew up in a tenement building in the South Bronx which was rent controlled. It was an interesting apartment building because several of my mother’s relatives also lived in the building, so there never was a problem with babysitting. It was an environment where everybody looked out for everybody else. It was the kind of thing kids hate when they’re growing up because they can’t get away with anything. It didn’t mean that we couldn’t do anything, it meant that if we did we’d get caught. So we had to realize there were consequences. It was really a very warm and cohesive childhood.”

ALLEN SESSOMS



“My mother’s parents threw her out for marrying my father. They said that nobody was going to want those ugly mulatto children. They said that this was not a good marriage for her, and they erased her completely from the family history. So I grew up in a family with my white mother, and my grandparents, and my brothers and sisters, but very much a Black family, because my mother’s parents had erased her so completely from her own family. And my grandparents, they accepted my mother, and they said she has given up everything for you, for my Dad, for my brother. And so they embraced her and took her into the family.”

MARIANNE SCOTT





“The neighborhoods were segregated, and so we lived in a Black community, but I’ll tell you the advantage of it. Because you had people from all walks of life. You had in the neighborhood a plumber, you had professors, you had doctors, you had dentists, you had all kinds of people living there, carpenters, everything. People who worked doing menial work in the hotels, everyone was in the segregated community. So as I said later in life, I was awfully glad I grew up like that because I didn’t have any stuck-up attitudes about people. I thought that was very grounding, a very good way to grow up.”

SHEILA THOMAS



“I was about eight. What I remember is one night my mother drove me, and I don’t know why it was just me, but we were out and she drove by a house that was across the street from a park, and we parked at night and she said that’s where we’re going to live. And she had never been inside the house. Obviously none of the children hadn’t. And my father had to go with a white man and went as the handyman or went as just I’m not even sure exactly how they described him, but anyway, he went and somehow or other I don’t know the details. It’s interesting. And I look back and wish I’d asked more, but I know that they bought the house with cash and we moved in without people really knowing. And as I said, it was an all-white neighborhood. It changed pretty quickly after that.”

KAREN WILLIAMSON

“It was clear that what we were going to do was be educated. Period.”



“My father’s parents, my gut memory of them is nurturance. My father’s mother died when I was very young, so I have only one real memory of her, but of course I have a feeling. And the one memory is when we have driven up from D.C., pull into Sharswood Street, pull up to the curb and she runs to the car, just beaming all this love in my face. And her husband, my grandfather, my main memory of him is, I come in, we bring you in, go into the summer kitchen, sit in the chair, wrap the thing around, he cuts my hair, because he was a barber, among other things.”

SULE GREG WILSON



“The story is that right after he got married, he went with his new bride to the train station in Columbia, South Carolina. And he got up to the train station and got to the ticket taker and pulled out a stack of money and slammed it down on the counter and said take me this far north. So that amount of money took him to Greenwich, Connecticut. He went into the train station and said, where do the colored people live, where do the colored people work? And the man at the train station noticed he was wearing a Mason ring. And so he was hired as a cook at the Mason lodge.”

ERNEST WILSON



“I can remember as a small girl when my grandmother pressed the city government to get our street paved. And in general, in the Black part of town, the streets weren’t paved, whereas in the white part of town the streets were paved. One grandfather worked at a brickyard during the Depression. My mother’s father was a hod carrier – a hod is like a metal platform that carried bricks – it’s both a skilled and a laborer job. All four of my grandparents were fortunate to have jobs during the Depression and they took great pride in owning their own homes. And like most Black parents at the time, they really sacrificed to send their own children to college. I don’t think any of them had finished high school. It was a typical thing in the community, that people wanted to see their children do better than they did.”

FRANCILLE WILSON





“You simply did not see people who weren’t Black. They were so much on the fringe of your existence. Maybe they were crucial in subterranean ways that we didn’t know, but I only knew a few white people, and they were Jewish. One had the store in our neighborhood, and then there was a family who were friends of my parents, and that was it. And sometimes it’s embarrassing to think of how we talked about white people because it was like they were from Mars or something. We didn’t know what they dressed like and what their bodies were like and what they smelled like, half of which was conjecture. It was like a foreign land, but it wasn’t mean. It wasn’t snarky. It was actually a very innocent kind of, wow, the people on the other side of the mountain.”

WENDY WILSON-FALL



“I was the youngest of 6 children. Everyone else in the family had been born in Augusta, Georgia, so they sometimes referred to me as the Yankee. My father moved to Detroit in April 1929 and moved the family a few months later. He had been a fairly successful businessman in Augusta, Georgia and had developed a middle-class mentality. He had a dairy farm whose mortgage was held by one of the two Black banks in the United States at that time, the Penny Savings Bank of Augusta, Georgia. But the boll weevil went through the Southeastern United States in the spring of 1929, and all of the banks had to liquidate, and they took his farm. And so he went to Detroit where he had an Uncle and got a job at the Ford Motor Company.”

WILBUR WRIGHT

Don’t walk stooped over, because nobody can get on your back if you stand up straight and do the best you can.



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