



## *Voices of Baltimore: Life Under Segregation* By Gary Homana

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*Reviewed by Yanika Patterson, Kenosha (WI) Unified School District*

### **Abstract**

*This review of Gary Homana's 2019 documentary, *Voices of Baltimore: Life Under Segregation* showcases the oral history of seven African Americans who lived in Baltimore during segregation. Four areas will be discussed: Answering the call, insulation/isolation, expectations, and then and now. This film takes a deeper look at how Baltimore dealt with segregation being on that Mason/Dixon border.*

**Keywords:** *Segregation, Desegregation, Baltimore, Jim Crow*

### **Introduction**

Gary Homana, PhD, a professor at Towson University, brings to life the lived experiences of those who lived in the city of Baltimore during segregation and desegregation. The documentary hears from those who lived through the Jim Crow Era as they expressed how their lives were shaped at the time and what pushed them to want to change the situation. In this review, four areas will be examined: Answering the Call, Insulation/Isolation, Expectations, and Then and Now.

The documentary captured the oral histories of Louis S. Diggs, Treopia Green Washington, Evelyn Chatmon, Dr. Patricia Welch, Dr. Walter Gill, Elizabeth Francis Nichols Gill, and Judge Robert Bell. These prominent African American discussed growing up in Baltimore, which is on the Mason/Dixon<sup>1</sup> border during the era of legal segregation, or Jim Crow. They discussed how segregation affected education before and after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v Board of Education*.

### **Answering the Call: Make a Way Where there Ain't No Way**

*Voices* opens up with retired judge, Robert Bell. He discusses the importance of sitting down for the documentary. Bell describes how no one wants to speak about segregation and how

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1. The Mason-Dixon border refers to the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania. Along with the Ohio River, the line separated slave states of the south and the free states of the north. Today, it still figuratively divides the north and south politically and socially (Davenport, 2004).

it affected society then as well as today. He explains that it is important for this topic to be discussed because we are still experiencing the same situations as those during the Jim Crow Era.

Dr. Walter Gill discusses how during legal segregation, black students and white students did not attend school together. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) started the fight to integrate schools in Baltimore. In 1952, Gill, along with 9 other black boys, help to integrate Baltimore Polytechnic Institute. These boys were considered the most academically capable of handling the rigor of the institute. Ten years later, the same group of boys integrated Baltimore City College.

Dr. Patricia Welch discussed how students in Black schools were group together based on their academic abilities. She along with 7 other students, were told they were going to integrate the White high school. Children were not given the choice as far as participating in integration, rather, it was forced integration. This situation put significant pressure on children aged 16-17. Welch stated that you did what you were told. She also said that at the time the children felt like they were doing something important, but they did not understand the impact they were making. The students experienced culture shock. Black students were used to their Black teachers encouraging them and being helpful. In this new setting, their White teachers did not think they were smart and deserved to be in the school.

Treopia Green Washington has a very interesting back story. She is the sister of Ernest Green, one of the Little Rock Nine, who helped to integrate Central High School. She saw what was happening to her brother and wondered if it was worth it. She saw the same protesting going on in Baltimore that was seen in Little Rock. Treopia pointed out that many of the protesters were White mothers since the White men had to go to work.

Louis Diggs explained how his students would ask him about the history of Black communities in Baltimore and realizing this knowledge was not there. Looking through books in the library and other resources, the history of the Black communities of Baltimore seemed to have disappeared. He made it his mission to research and retell the history of those black communities. One black community in particular was Winter's Lane. He researched and found that it was listed as a historical African American community, but not much else was accessible. He looked through old documents and families of former residents to get information about Winter Lane. He compiled his finding into the book, *It All Started on Winters Lane: A History of the Black Community in Catonsville, Maryland*.

Elizabeth Gill discusses how there were different rules of segregation depending on the environment. Blacks and Whites could not eat together, but they could work together. One day, she and a couple of other Black co-workers decided to go to lunch at Cove Restaurant, which did not serve Blacks. They sat and waited, while being insulted and having things thrown at them. After a few hours, they were finally served. This experience reinforced the idea that no one was really interested in integrating restaurants.

### **Insulation/Isolation: Insular Notion of Segregated Communities**

After the first section of the film provided viewers an introduction to each participant, the documentary allowed the participants to just speak on different aspects of segregation in Baltimore. They started by discussing Jim Crow. The Jim Crow Era left Black America in their "place" in America. They could live in America, but they could not experience the benefits of America. Black Americans were here to be used by Whites for their benefit. This notion was felt by every Black American, including those in Baltimore. The participants did not have to be told that they lived in segregation. It was just their life. They knew which streets were safe to go on and the

places that they could shop in. Examples included the pharmacy and Old Town Mall, which catered to the Black community in Baltimore.

Next, participants discussed the Black experience in education settings. Black students who went to Black school were made to feel like they belonged. The teachers continuously told them that they could be somebody and that getting an education was very important to their life. Black student felt that they could learn and be successful within the segregated school system.

Life in segregated Baltimore was more known than shown. There were no signs that said “Whites Only” or “Colored Only.” Yet, everyone knew of the invisible barriers. This was in stark contrast to segregation in the south. Blacks had to walk in the back doors. There were signs that blatantly told everyone where Whites could go and where Blacks could go. Louis Diggs spoke about segregation in the War. Black soldiers did not sleep in the bunks, but slept under the tanks. Black soldiers ate World War II rations. Although Harry Truman ended segregation in the military in 1948, this did not make things easier for the Black soldiers. Black soldiers would come home, after fighting for their country, to being treated like the lowest of the lowest.

The Black community knew a segregated life was not easy, so they made sure that Black kids felt loved. They did not want children to think they were missing anything by not being able to do the same things as White kids. Everyone in the Black community looked out for each other.

### **Expectations: The Responsibility Greater than Yourself—the Obligation**

The participants spoke passionately about how education was perceived in the Black community. The Black community pushed their Black children to excel, be good, and be somebody. Black children were told that a high school education was needed in order to face obstacles once they became adults. Baltimore Black families wanted to preserve the generations. They encourage their children to be successful so they can reach back, and pull up others.

All participants spoke of how mediocrity was unacceptable—excellence was the expectation. They had to be twice as good as the White children in order to even get their foot in the door. Black children were always told that they did not just represent themselves, but they represented their entire race. Black girls were encouraged to come back to the neighborhood and teach, since teaching was the highest occupation for Black women.

Robert Bell stated that schools are as segregated now as they were during legal segregation. However, expectations for high academic achievement is low for Black students. Furthermore, Black students are being criminalized in school at higher rates. Bell says,

I see us on this—the—same path today as we were on then. While we have made a tremendous amount of progress—if you look at it—we have a good ways to go. And a lot of it has to do with trying to beat back—once again—the same kinds of issues that we were facing back then. You know, you would’ve thought that you wouldn’t have to fight certain battles again, but we are now looking at a situation where race as a factor—a negative factor—is again raising its head. Racism in this country is becoming much more tolerant. It started back in—I guess it started with Reagan—and he talked about the bright city on the hill or something of that sort and being proud of the country and urging people not to look critically at the flaws in the society. You’ve got the same thing coming back around again.

### Then and Now: Where We've Been, Where We're Going

Evelyn Chatmon described desegregation as mismanaged. Black children and White children should not have been thrown together without a significant plan for real integration. The decision to integrate should have been deliberated and talked about first. However, few want to talk about the scars of desegregation, but we, as a society, need to confront these realities. These discussions are limited because white privilege often works to silence the history explored in this documentary and many others like it.

Segregation needs to be talked about in order for it to be eradicated. People need to realize that segregation is still apart of society. Issues facing Black America in the 50s and 60s are still issues relevant today. Walter Gill spoke about how Blacks today need to learn from the people who have been there. He and others who lived through segregation need to share their stories.

Welch, Chatmon, and Washington all touched on the need for there to be more Black teachers in educational settings. However, the education system today does not have the same type of commitment from black teachers as was seen before segregation. Chatmon mentioned that currently, 84 percent of elementary school teachers are White. This reality perpetuated the thought that some students are “up here” and some students are “down there” throughout schools systems nationwide. This belief system needs to change before any structural change can come to end segregation in education.

### *Voices in Baltimore: Conclusion*

*Voices in Baltimore* gives a taste of segregation life in Baltimore. The participants seemed to go back in time as they told about their experiences. All have gone on to have stellar careers in law, education, and corporate. They also remembered what was taught to them: to go back and pull others up as well.

Homana provides other scholars studying racial segregation a great starting point to conduct future works. More oral histories are needed to share the heartfelt stories of those who experienced these troubling times. The documentary sheds light on to a dark period of American history, but showcases how these stories are important to remember in contemporary times. The participants challenge all of us to start the discussions and not be afraid to be uncomfortable to make a change.

### References

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**Yanika Patterson** is a doctoral candidate at Aurora University. She is a teacher in Kenosha Unified School District. She is an advisor in the National Society of Black Engineers, which increase the number of culturally responsible Black Engineers, who excel academically, succeed professional and positively impact the community.