

YES, Honest reflections on Union County's history of racism EVEN HERE. and how we can do better

by Mira Mehta and Amaya Wilkerson

From the moment the first enslaved Africans reached American shores in 1619, systemic racism has been woven into American society and institutions, and while progress has been made in removing it, there is still a long way to go. The killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor this past spring sparked a new wave of protest, and people around the world, including much of the Westfield community, stepped up to stand in solidarity for racial justice. To have a real impact, though, we must make an effort to learn about and address the racism in our own backyard.

While racism often seems like an abstract concept whose impacts are felt in less enlightened places far away from us, it manifests itself in very real and dangerous ways throughout the community. WHS senior Nala Scott said that her grandmother was shocked by the racist encounters Scott had faced. "Even in the 50's and 60's she didn't experience some of the racism I had endured, and she lived in Alabama," said Scott.

Moreover, the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies 21 hate groups currently operating in New Jersey, as compared to 16 in Alabama and 12 in Mississippi. New Jersey's dark history of discrimination, including in Union County, helps contextualize these numbers.

Notably, Clark was classified as a sundown town, according to Professor James Loewen's official database. As Loewen wrote in his book *Sundown Towns*, "A sundown town is any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus 'all-white' on purpose."

Available census data shows that there was not a single Black person living in Clark in 1905 or 1930; as recently as 1970, there was only one. At face value, this might seem like a

coincidence, but both custom and fear were intentionally used to maintain racial homogeneity.

These practices earned the town an infamous reputation among Black communities in surrounding areas.

Westfield resident Pamela Brug said, "[When I was a kid, in the 60s and 70s] we were told to make sure that you were not anywhere near Clark when it started getting dark. When they would have friends that were coming into Westfield, they told them to drive around. If you were coming off the parkway, you would probably get off in Cranford and then come into Westfield instead."

Former President of the Westfield Martin Luther King Jr. Association Donnell Carr added, "When I first came to town, I was told that when you're driving through Clark, make sure you're driving the speed limit because they'll stop you, and they can be rough."

For those who are skeptical of a classification based on personal accounts, Loewen said, "Whenever a topic is embarrassing, or even just plain sinful or wrong, good oral history is more likely to be accurate than the [written] sources."

Despite the frequent use of oral history, many people would discount the relevance of people's personal stories. It is far easier to believe that the low Black population in Clark is a product of wealth. However, according to US Census data, in 1930, Westfield, which was comparable in wealth, had a population that was 6.4% Black. Thus, to claim that the cost of living explains why there were a total of zero Black people living in Clark at the same time would be inaccurate. The racial demographics of the town did not happen by chance.

Today, the town has moved beyond its sundown past; the 2010 census showed that there were 592 Black peo-

ple living in Clark, making up 2.6% of the town. While this is progress, the town has not actually acknowledged its unfortunate history or taken any significant steps to actively promote diversity and racial justice.

In fact, at a protest for racial justice this June, Mayor Sal Bonaccorso, when asked to say that he was "pro Black," responded that he was "pro Black for all the good Black people in [his] life." While he later attempted to clarify his remarks, many were not satisfied with his stance. *Optic* contacted Mayor Bonaccorso's office for comment but did not receive a response.

"We were told to make sure that you were not anywhere near Clark when it started getting dark."

- Pamela Brug

These continued problems, combined with a lack of systemic change, have led some Black residents in the area to remain cautious. Brug said, "I have no idea how [the warnings about Clark] started, but I know that I passed it down to my kids."

This history of racism evidently continues to impact people in the area today, and it is imperative that people be educated about it in order to work towards greater racial justice. However, it is important to understand that Clark's problems are not unique.

Loewen said, "Sundown towns were most common across the north [and] racism was therefore prevalent across the north." Bigotry extended to towns with substantial Black populations and flourishing Black communities, including Westfield.

In fact, Carr noted, "I never [actually] had a problem in Clark. The only time I ever had a problem at



According to the Westfield Historical Society, slaves were openly traded on the streets of Westfield through the early 19th century. Allegedly, Lincoln Plaza was the site of Westfield's slave auction. Photo by Mira Mehta

all... it was in Westfield.”

Westfield's history of race relations is complex and occasionally confounding. While the town is predominantly white, Black people have been contributing to the Westfield community since its creation, though their status in the town as a whole has changed significantly. This history has repeatedly been hidden and denied.

MLK Association President Liz Wolf said, “At the 200th anniversary... there was no recognition of the role of African Americans in Westfield.”

The town is now making a concerted effort to present more honest and

inclusive history for its 300th anniversary. Carr, with the help of Wolf and many others, created an African American History in Westfield Walking Tour (available on *theclio.com*) and an accompanying booklet, highlighting a complicated and multifaceted view of the town's racial history.

Carr said, “If you go back far enough, you'll find that there were slaves, and everyone in Westfield at the time when the first settlement was here pretty much owned slaves.”

“There was a slave auction site, and slaves were actually sold here,” Wolf said.

Westfield's active involvement in enslaving people, despite having ended long ago, cannot continue to be ignored. It established a foundation of inequity that has had a lasting impact on the town's demographics and social fabric.

There was a segregated – but thriving – Black community in Westfield throughout much of the 20th century, but its achievements are often overlooked.

Westfield Mayor Shelley Brindle said, “We have a very rich history here with Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson, all amazing African American contributors to the town who we haven't done enough, in my mind, to put forward and celebrate.”

In addition to the Black celebrities who lived in Westfield, there were Black neighborhoods, created in part as a result of segregation, but flourishing nonetheless.

Carr said, “A lot of these things with segregation – it's subtle – like when you move into town, and a real estate agent steers you to a particular area, that sort of thing, or steers you away from another area. Steering has been a big part of housing and housing discrimination all over America.”

For example, Wolf said, “In the 1960s the real estate agent wouldn't show [my friend] any houses except in the sort of traditional Black areas... So they actually got a white friend to buy the house, and then they bought it from them.”

Before these kinds of barriers had been broken, however, Black residents established their own community groups and economic hubs. According to Wolf, “West Broad and the neighboring streets were just dotted with doctors and dentists – [it was] a Black professional zone.”

Some of these businesses and community centers, including the Plinton Curry Funeral Home and Elks Cen-

tennial Lodge, still exist today. However, based on US Census data, the Black population has actually become a much smaller percentage of Westfield in recent years – from 6.4% in 1930 to 4.8% in 1970 to 3.2% in 2010.

Carr attributes this change to a “re-gentrification,” in which rising costs for homes price out many members of “minority communities... [who] don't have that kind of money.”

Brindle added, “Over time, a lot of entry-level homes have been knocked down, and have now been replaced with those big, expensive homes, and that is a big reason why our housing stock has become less diversified.”

Even as the racial and economic composition of the town has changed, society's attitude towards, and understanding of, race seem to have become more nuanced and tolerant. Despite this, some racial tensions have remained in Westfield, and they cannot be ignored.

Brindle said, “I think we have to be really honest with ourselves about our deficiencies and where we can do better. I think that sometimes Westfield really is a special place to live and grow up and raise a family and be here, but that doesn't mean we're perfect.”

For example, Scott recalled an incident in which a girl she didn't know “said ‘You're Black.’” Scott responded “‘What's wrong with that?’ and [the girl] said ‘a lot.’”

In addition to problems with individuals, Black residents of Westfield have experienced racial profiling by police officers. WHS alumnus Kunle Badmus shared a personal experience with racial profiling where he was pulled over by the police without any apparent reason. He said, “It was unsettling; it irked me. I didn't tell my parents about it because they wouldn't have allowed me out past 10 p.m.”

Badmus and Scott's experiences are not unique. Carr said, “I've had a cou-

ple of what I'd call uncomfortable incidents, and I'm pretty sure they were based on my color. I mean, in the [40] years I've lived in Westfield I've had probably half a dozen incidents. And some I would consider fairly innocuous, but two or three I can remember I was humiliated [and] offended.”

These stories expose a concerning reality that seems to conflict with the sense of community many Westfield residents are familiar with. However, according to Wolf, under the leadership of Chief Christopher Battiloro, the Westfield Police Department has shown a greater consciousness of racial inequities. Wolf specifically noted the department's support for the MLK Day Service and the “Say Their Names” initiative. This seems to be a step in the right direction in terms of community-police relationships.

As we examine the dark history of oppression and reflect on its lingering effects, it is important to remember that we can control whether or not the future will be better.

Change is the culmination of thousands of small actions – and some larger, institutional reforms – propelled by a collective commitment to growth and justice. Fortunately, there is no shortage of ideas about what we can do better.

This was exemplified by the peaceful Black Lives Matter protest held in Mindowaskin Park on June 7, organized by Scott and other WHS students. Scott said, “The memories of what I went through in

this town triggered so much pain and I just felt like I had to do it. When you feel silenced and unnoticed since the age of six, you just have to speak up.”

Though neither Scott nor Badmus believe holding a protest is sufficient change, they are proud of what they were able to accomplish that day. Scott said, “There are many things holding us back, like the racism I experience, but there is progression, like the fact that I was able to stand up on the stage and speak.”

The protest was attended and supported by many government officials, including New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy and Mayor Brindle. Brindle said, “I thought the outpouring of support from the community was quite remarkable. I thought the organization by the high school students was incredible. And I think

[the question now is], what are the actionable things that can come out of that?”



WHS Senior Nala Scott at the Black Lives Matter protest that took place in Westfield on June 7. Photographer/NJ Governor's Office



Governor Phil Murphy speaking to a crowd at the Black Lives Matter protest in Westfield on June 7.
 Photographer/NJ Governor's Office

For Scott, this means more inclusive education and accurate history about Black Americans and people of color as a whole. She said, "I know when I was in history learning the same things over and over again, I didn't feel like I got the representation I wanted." Although the district has recently made some efforts to change this with its new elective course Power, Privilege and Imbalance in American Society, Scott hopes to expand racial education. One suggestion Scott is pursuing is an after-school club specifically dedicated to the cause.

In addition to including diversity in the curriculum, it is imperative that there also be diversity in the Westfield community. Brindle has emphasized the need for more affordable housing, or as she described it, "workforce housing," in which people would pay a reduced rent as compared to the town's market rate. Considering the

high prices in Westfield, she said, "For someone to live in affordable apartments in Westfield and qualify, they would have to make an income between \$50,000 and \$80,000 a year." This would mean that many of the people who work to support the Westfield community – teachers, firefighters and other public service workers – would be able to be part of the community as well.

A greater variety of housing would also support a more racially and economically diverse community. Brindle said, "The more opportunities you have to interact with people who are different from yourself always brings out greater empathy and understanding. I actually believe it would make us more attractive to many potential buyers of a new generation who are looking for that in selecting the places where they live."

The active pursuit of diversity and

interaction with different types of people gives hope for a more united and compassionate future.

Carr said that this commitment from the "top tends to leak through the system."

"Certainly, in the last six months, [these ideas] have been just more and more widely embraced by more and more people in Westfield," said Wolf.

Although Westfield has changed significantly over the past few decades and centuries, it is far from the most accepting town. There is certainly more work to be done as a community, and the only question is how much work Westfield residents are really willing to put in. As WHS Social Studies Teacher Daniel Farabaugh explained, "It's getting over that hurdle that is difficult. The idea that there is no simple solution to this that doesn't require sacrifice and restructure and sustained effort."