

MONTCLAIR RACE AMITY DAY

13 JUNE 2021

The following vignettes draw examples from the history of the United States and from Montclair to demonstrate examples of interracial cooperation in service to community.

As shared during the 2021 Montclair Race Amity Day program

The Reverend and the Rabbi

Marching Together



Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel first met in Chicago at the 1963 conference on “Religion and Race” organized by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The two came from very different backgrounds – Dr. King had grown up in Atlanta, Georgia, while Abraham Heschel arrived in the United States as a refugee from Hitler’s Europe in 1940 – “a brand plucked from the fire,” as he wrote. Yet the two found an intimacy that transcended the growing public rift between their two communities. Rabbi Heschel brought Dr King and his message to a wide Jewish audience, and Dr. King made Rabbi Heschel a central figure in the struggle for civil rights.

The bond between them was immediate. Dr. King’s speech at the 1963 national conference on Religion and Race, was titled “A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues” and affirmed that the struggle against racism was an interfaith effort.

In introducing Dr. King to the audience, Heschel asked, “Where in America today do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us.” In response, Dr. King stated that Heschel “is indeed a truly great prophet.... Here and there we find those who refuse to remain silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows,”

In March 1965, Rabbi Heschel responded to Dr. King’s call for religious leaders to join the Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights. The march was especially significant for Heschel, and he recalled feeling like his “legs were praying” as he walked next to King. “I remember,” Dr. King recalled, “marching from Selma to Montgomery, how he stood at my side ...to a great extent he inspired clergymen of all faiths to do something they had not done before.”

After the assassination of Dr. King, Rabbi Heschel said of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, “I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow his way. The whole future of America will depend on the influence of Dr. King.”

Dr King and Rabbi Herschel charged us all to transcend the history that separates us and to lift up the truth of Dr. King’s words that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”



Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt

A child of former slaves and a child of American wealth



Decades before Dr. King and Rabbi Heschel, a friendship and collaboration grew between two of the most influential women in U.S. history: Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt. Mary McLeod Bethune was an educator and civil rights activist and Eleanor Roosevelt was a humanitarian, a civil rights advocate, and the wife of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Like King and Heschel, they came from very different backgrounds. Mary McLeod Bethune was born in 1875 in South Carolina, a child of former slaves. Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 in New York to one of America’s wealthiest and most politically elite families, the Roosevelts.

The two women first met in 1927 at a luncheon for representatives of the National Council of Women of the US. The luncheon was hosted by Eleanor and her mother-in-law, Sara. They had invited Mary because of her growing national reputation as a leader, educator and proponent of women’s rights. Mary was the only African American present, and Sara Roosevelt noticed the apprehension on the faces of the Southern women as everyone was being ushered to the table to eat. Sara made it clear that Mary was a welcomed guest by taking her by the arm and seating her to the right of Eleanor - a place of honor. From that moment, a friendship formed between the three women. .

Through her relationship with the First Lady, Mary McLeod Bethune had unprecedented access to the White House and the president. Eleanor Roosevelt used her privilege and influence to show support for Mary’s work and to help shape national policy on race relations. For example, in 1933, Eleanor called a meeting of African American leaders to the White House to discuss issues of burning importance to them - this was a first. The group got the ear of the president who attended briefly.

Mary and Eleanor at one point joined forces to convince President Roosevelt to establish a Negro Division of the President’s National Youth Administration - and Mary was appointed director. As

director, Mary released funds to black colleges to participate in the Civilian Pilot Training Program which graduated some of the first black pilots. Her efforts led to an aviation program at West Virginia State College, and later at the Tuskegee Institute, which produced the famous World War II African American hero fighter pilots known as the Red Tails.

There is so much more to say about the accomplishments of these two women, separately and together. But the bottom line is that through their friendship they bridged what might have seemed to some to be insurmountable differences to make a profound impact on country.



The YWCA of Montclair

Telling the Full Story of the Israel Crane House



There are many more examples of racial amity in U.S. history. But now we'll turn to Montclair's history. We'll begin with a formerly untold story of the YWCA of Montclair and the Israel Crane House.

The YWCA of Montclair was started in 1912 by Alice Hooe Foster, the first African American woman to graduate from Montclair High School. It was a "colored" Y because YWCAs were segregated in the first half of the twentieth century. Traditionally, colored YWCAs were offshoots of the white YWCA and only created if the white YWCA deemed it appropriate. The Montclair YWCA was an exception. It was the only YWCA for African American women and girls in

America that was independent and not affiliated with a white YWCA.

In 1920, the YWCA purchased the Israel Crane house and moved its headquarters there. The house became a boarding house and social center - a safe haven for African American women who arrived in Montclair, often from the South, looking for work as domestics. It was also an educational center where African American women and girls took classes and heard talks from noted African Americans of the day, like Mary McLeod Bethune and Langston Hughes.

During the Y's early years, there were two governing boards - a board of managers that consisted of African American women, and a board of trustees that consisted of white women. The two boards merged in 1953, allowing the women to work more closely together.

Was it a perfect collaboration? Probably not. After all, there was still segregation and discrimination in town. But they were pushing the envelope in many ways in the midst of a still very much segregated town.

By the 1960's, the YWCA was integrated. Dolores "Bobby" Reilly, who was the YWCA board secretary in the 60's, was quoted in a 2013 Montclair Times article, saying, "The people who did come to join, white or Hispanic or whatever, we all worked together as one for the betterment of the young women."

Then the history of the Crane House took a different path.

By 1965, the YWCA had outgrown the Crane House and was ready to build a new site. To save the Crane House from demolition, local preservationists rallied to move the house to its current location on Orange Road. They formed the Montclair Historical Society and converted the house into a historical museum. They followed the historical preservation trends of the day, and restored the house to focus on the early history of the 19th century when the Crane family lived there. In the process, the 45-year history of the house as the hub of social, artistic, and educational activity for African American women and girls was lost.

In 2011, the Montclair Historical Center embarked on a project to finally tell the full history of the Crane House in a meaningful and permanent way. That effort required collaboration between the Montclair Historical Center staff and members of African American community to rebuild trust that had been lost. The Historical Center reached out to the predominantly Black churches in town for their archives, solicited input from African American community leaders, and asked the African American women who had been part of the YWCA to tell their stories in a documentary.

Today, the stories of the YWCA for African American women and girls are told in the historic Crane House and Historic YWCA on Orange Road, as well as in a documentary produced by the Montclair Historical Society in 2014 titled "A Place to Become: Montclair through the Eyes of the Glenridge Avenue YWCA Women (1920-1965)."

I have to imagine there were friendships formed across racial lines as people worked together over the course of the shared history of the YWCA and the Crane House.



The Mothers' Plan

The Challenge of Integration



In the 1950s and 1960s, Montclair, like many school districts across the country, was facing the issue of segregation. Neighborhoods were markedly divided among color lines, with black families being consigned largely to the Fourth Ward; before 1960, real estate agents didn't even show black families houses for sale north of Watchung Ave. There was gross inequity in

educational services and infrastructure in schools on the north and south end of town.

In 1966, in a landmark case of *Rice vs. Montclair Board of Education*, resulted in Montclair being put under a desegregation order. Montclair tried busing, bringing children from disparate neighborhoods to schools across town in an attempt to desegregate. This however only led to tensions and white parents pulling their kids out of the public school system altogether.

In the 1970s, a new effort emerged, spearheaded by Montclair residents Jean Kidd, a white mother and Carolyn Brown, an African American mother. Carolyn and Jean went to Trenton together to meet with Nida Thomas who was at the time, the director of the NJ Office of Equal Opportunity. "What can you do to help us?" they asked. Together, the three women, developed an idea that they presented to the Board of Education and to the Superintendent.

What is now called "the Mothers' Plan" was a plan for a magnet school system in which schools would specialize in math, arts, science, performing arts, etc. With this plan, Black, white and any other students would attend schools not based on geography but based on interest. It had the effect of drawing, especially White parents, away from the comfort of their neighborhood schools, and into different parts of Montclair. At the same time, parents started what they called "Living Room dialogues" within each district. Three to four people would offer their homes for discussions about schools and race and how to address the challenges.

Of course, challenges remain and the Board of Education has much on its plate and continues to grapple with the challenge of the achievement gap. But as the documentary about the Mothers' Plan points out, "Montclair isn't made for you, you make it what it is." And Jean Kidd and Carolyn Brown, came together, to make it better for Montclair kids.



Continuing Efforts

Unitarian Universality Church of Montclair and the Community Learning Circles on Race



The Unitarian Universalist Church of Montclair has long had a history of embracing the social issues of its day.

In the early 1900, for example, UUCM - then known as the Unity Church - was holding Sunday evening lectures that drew notable speakers of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Speakers Included Clarence Darrow, Robert

Frost, W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes. In January 1912, Booker T. Washington spoke there on "The Race Problem." In May of that same year, Abdu'l-Baha, the son of the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, spoke at the church on the topic of the unity of mankind.

Today, the Undoing Racism Committee at UUCM has, for more than 25 years hosted numerous discussion groups, student workshops, trainings, film screenings, and lectures to promote racial justice. And it continues to spotlight and encourage conversation on issues like Black Lives Matter, ending mass incarceration, and other issues around racial inequality.



And then there's MFEE, the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence. In March of last year, MFEE launched a program called, America to Me: Real Talk Montclair. The goal of the

program was, and is, to provide a framework for real conversations in Montclair about race and the persistent racial inequalities, even here in a town that prides itself on its diversity.

As part of the program, African American and white volunteers have paired up and gone through training together to facilitate these important conversations.

This year the program has been re-named and re-envisioned as the Montclair Community Learning Circles on Race. But it's doing the same work of bringing the community together across racial lines to listen and learn from each other about race in Montclair - and most importantly - to find ways to move forward together toward racial equity.

