

One Richmond: Recognizing the Strengths of our Collective History and Modern Day Community

By Jovanka Beckles

Richmond has a long history that has been enriched by the many cultures that have chosen Richmond as their home. For certain groups of people such as African-Americans, Latinos, and people from Asia, the Richmond history is a history of struggle to establish and maintain rights that many people take for granted. Only by understanding this history can we appreciate these rights, and can we know what it takes to maintain them for ourselves, our children and for future generations.

Part of coming together in community to build *One Richmond*, requires that we recognize the contributions that all of our cultures make to the city. I want to remind our citizens that the history of African-Americans in Richmond is a history of a struggle to overcome discrimination, and economic oppression against overwhelming odds. We have been successful to a point, and yet we still have a long way to go. We have a rich history full of courageous freedom fighters, and we can learn from the past. What we have won so far has required struggle lead by many of our elders in the African-American community, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. It is critical that we remember this history because we have lost sight of the traditions that brought us the Gary family in Richmond, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who championed civil rights for all.

To some being “Black” today means pitting Blacks against other races, or keeping our people back as long as we have a Black leader. Neither of these tactics serves us. We all treasure Dr. Martin Luther King's legacy. A local example is the courageous Gary family whose stand for their rights became a victory for all of us. I published a short story of the Gary family's experience to share with others a model of what a united and determined people can accomplish. Here is an abbreviated version of that story.

The Gary's: Recognizing the Value of Community

During World War II, Richmond became one of the most important industrial sites in America. Tens of thousands of African-Americans and Mexicans moved to Richmond to work in the shipyards and other booming war time industries. In order to accommodate the large influx of workers and their families, the largest war housing program was developed in Richmond. In the early 1950's many of the projects which had housed the new Richmond residents were demolished to make room for new industrial buildings.

Former Navy man Wilbur Gary (a World War II vet) and his wife Borece Gary, faced losing their house to one of these demolitions. They decided to purchase a home in Rollingwood, a formerly all-white defense worker subdivision. Although the Supreme Court had ruled in 1948 that *restrictive covenants* (clauses in contracts that forbid resale of homes to Blacks or Jews) were not enforceable by law, the practice was



Black Realtor's Smashed Windows
Richmond Independent 3/6/2952

Wilbur Gary's Open Letter

March 12, 1952

Dear Friends:

I wish to express deepest thanks to the many hundreds of democratic minded Americans, both Negro and white, who have come to the defense of my home and family within the last few days, and to those of my white neighbors who have pledged their support.

When it became known that we were moving to the all-white neighborhood of Rollingwood, a Ku Klux Klan cross was placed on our lawn, our window was smashed by a rock, the window of the real estate agent who handled the sale was similarly smashed by bigots.

The night we moved in, a threatening mob of some 400 persons gathered. In open defiance of the law they stoned our new home and shouted insults.

Within a short time over 100 Negro and white men and women arrived on the scene to defend us, and by their presence prevented more vicious acts by the bigots.

Sheriff's deputies stood by and observed the rock throwing, they did not make a single arrest, nor did they order the rock throwers to stop...

still frequently and informally enforced by realtors, community associations, city governments, and mob rule backed up by police.

After purchasing the home, and before the Gary's could move in, a white cross was burned on their lawn. The family spent their first nights in the house surrounded by a mob throwing rocks, as Sheriff's deputies looked on. When fear tactics failed, the neighborhood association tried to buy them out to keep them from moving in. The Gary's knew their rights and stood firm. They recognized the need to work with other races and like minded people in the just fight for civil rights. Carloads of people --Black and white--came to defend the Gary's by sleeping on their floor, keeping vigil on the house and providing protective escorts for Mrs. Gary and the children on the way to work or school. The Gary's welcomed the help of sincere allies from other communities, and together they were able to successfully overcome discrimination and injustice.

The result not only helped the Gary's keep their house until the cowardly attacks stopped. It also helped build momentum in the movement against the housing discrimination all Black people faced. White neighbors defended the Gary's. Trade unions and liberal organizations mobilized. The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors and the Richmond City Council were forced to begin to take many actions to eliminate Jim Crow.

The Gary story is a proud moment in Richmond African-American History.



Jovanka Beckles has worked in Richmond for 13 years as a Children's Mental Health Provider. She is a member of the Richmond Planning Commission. Her pamphlet on the Gary Story can be downloaded from www.jovankabeckles.org/GARYSTORY.pdf

Jovanka can be reached at jovanka@jovankabeckles.org