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Just Keeping Hope: Margaret's Story

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EDGEMONT

I've always lived in Dayton but not always in my current neighborhood. I was born in West Dayton. The house that we lived in, it was my dad's family home. It was a rooming house that my grandmother owned. Families lived together at that time. Everybody didn't have houses. When he and my mom got married, that's where they moved. My parents stayed on the second floor with three other families. There was a kitchen and everyone shared the bathroom. There was another floor, the third floor, and there were two families up there. There was always someone around.

When you came across the bridge to West Dayton, we had our own downtown. Restaurants, vendors: the ice man, the watermelon man, the milk man, all used to make deliveries. **RUBENSTEINS WAS THE FIRST DEPARTMENT STORE TO GIVE BLACKS CREDIT. WINTERS BANK WAS THE FIRST BANK FOR BLACKS TO GO TO AND GET A BANK ACCOUNT. IT WAS A REALLY NICE PLACE TO GROW UP. THERE WERE WHITES, BLACKS, HUNGARIANS, APALACHIANS. WE ALL LIVED TOGETHER BECAUSE WE ALL HAD NOTHING.** We were all poor so we didn't know any better. Everybody knew everybody, if someone was sick, the whole community helped. If somebody died and there wasn't a mother in

that family, somebody would take those kids and treat them as their own. On the weekends, we cleaned. You started inside, then you moved outside. We cleaned up the yard, sidewalks, and the streets. If there was someone elderly or sick, you cleaned theirs too. Someone was always assigned to go in and help those that couldn't help themselves. It was a true village.

These days, my neighbors don't have pride in the way their house looks. So much trash. And here I am, out in the heat, keeping my yard looking nice. What kind of people are they? And they have kids. They aren't teaching them to have pride in their neighborhood.

The school was two streets over. You got your shots there, there was a dentist on certain days, you could get your eye glasses. Then we moved up in the world and started coming downtown for those things, where the city building is now. We didn't see doctors a lot but we weren't sick a lot either. We ate better, we knew what we were eating, you could look out the back door, a see your meat and your vegetables in the backyard. It was self-preservation, we lived off the land. As country as Dayton was, it was all I needed.

There wasn't a Kettering or a Beavercreek. Those popped up in the fifties. My father and

STORYTELLER: Margaret Smith

grandfather used to haul stuff out there but it was very small. I look back and can't believe that those fields turned into housing because we still had a lot of farming in those areas back then. Now we have all these municipalities that popped up because people had money and didn't want to live in Dayton anymore.

TO ME, DAYTON HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN UNDERCOVER RACIST. I didn't know it. You don't know about these things until you get older. Where Roosevelt is, that was whites and blacks. It was interracial where I lived, so I didn't know until I was in my twenties and I went to a store and was told to get out. As they say, we knew our place but I didn't know what I knew. When you're raised in it, it's hard to see.

THE BRIDGES SEPARATE THE BLACKS. Were they designed that way? I can't really say because where I'm at, Westwood, there were mainly whites in that area. They had better land but we were still in there together. Blacks owned a lot of stuff but everything was at a higher cost.

Families worked together, ate together, and shared everything because nobody had anything. Then we started getting hired at General Motors. That's when the breakdown started. Well, I'm not going to say it was General Motors itself, but when you start making money, and

you've been impoverished, you start wanting things and forgetting about family. The women and the children paid for it.

C.J. McLin was our head guy. You wanted something done, McLin would get it done. He went to my church. The Deacons watched him. You know how the President has guards, McLin had the Deacons. He was not afraid to go downtown and fight with them for our rights. He helped us get a lot of jobs, better schools. He was very political. He was everything. Oh, believe me, downtown was scared of him. **HE WAS OUR FREDERICK DOUGLASS.** If it hadn't been for him, we still wouldn't have anything. We'd probably still be renting rooms.

My favorite memories are at my grandmother's. She was the matriarch. She was my father's people. We didn't really associate with my mother's people. Until my grandmother got sick, my family always had traditions, everything happened at her house. Every day, someone was going over when they got off work. If you wanted to see a cousin, you just had to be over there at 3 o'clock. That's what we did. Family was essential. When she died, my aunts and uncles got disconnected. We see each other more now at funerals than anything—and we're about to run out of those too.

My mother's people, they were entrepreneurs. **MY MOTHER WAS LIGHT SKINNED AND THEY WANTED HER IN THE CLUBS AND SORORITIES BUT SHE REBELLED; SHE DIDN'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH THEM.** She did not live her life to the fullest; she was babysitting her little brother but he snuck off with his friend and drowned in the river. It caused her to grieve herself to death. It's so strange because my great niece died in my house last year; she was seven months old. Now I can relate to that grief. I have moments where it's too much. But coming up my mom didn't have people she could talk to. I had to go and find someone that I could talk to; because of my family history, I didn't want to go through what my mom did. I don't know how she lasted as long as she did.

It took me having to care for my father at the end of his life to come to terms with who my parents were. They were hard workers; they just had demons that they didn't know how to deal with. That's what I've tried to teach my children, my granddaughter, you cannot fight this by yourself. **YOU'LL DROWN WITHOUT SOMEONE TO TALK TO AND TO SHARE WITH.**

I don't know if there is a comeback from this. Whites are moving back to the neighborhood. That's a good thing. When the whites start

moving back, the city starts noticing. It shows growth. The area isn't bad. The highways have connected us better. We have to get back together. If we could start being compassionate to each other, if our politicians could get more in tune to the destruction that they're pushing down, we might have a chance. We need a reason to have hope. **WHEN YOU TAKE HOPE AWAY FROM ANY NATION, THE BATTLE IS LOST.**

I think right now we are in very crucial times. I'll never say how low can it go because I've witnessed some stuff—nothing is sacred. We're leaving it up to the young ones. We've created something that we don't even know how to fix. I mean, it's so simple, but people have to want to have change. I don't care what culture you're from, all cultures start with family being the source of everything. We just keep on hoping, looking for the good.

THERE ARE STILL GOOD PEOPLE.