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# *Rediscovering Our Values: Dayton Through My Brown Eyes*

STORYTELLER: Steve Ross

I was born in Dayton, Ohio, on September 16, 1952 in the southwest section of the city called “Hog Bottom”. This community was made up of shanty and shotgun-type homes that were mainly built by the owners. Because of segregation, we were a self-contained city within a city; all families seemed to work very hard in our community. One thing for sure, there were high moral values in those communities. Southwest Dayton, which was divided by W. 3rd St., was made up of doctors, lawyers, dentists, grocery stores, gas stations, funeral directors and other professionals, as well as pimps and prostitutes. There were several movie houses and a bowling alley.

## **EDGEMONT**



When I was born, we lived with my grandmother and several relatives on a small farm. My maternal grandparents came to Dayton in the early 1920s from Georgia. My grandfather died in 1944, the same year my mother graduated from Roosevelt High School. **THE FARM HAD LIVESTOCK, DOGS AND CHICKENS. WE ALSO GREW CORN, WHEAT AND RIBBON CANE (FOR SORGHUM MOLASSES). WE SOLD THE PRODUCE OFF OF THE BACK OF OUR PICKUP TRUCK.**

In 1956 at the age of four years old, my mother (Glenna) obtained her real estate license and began selling real estate for Fred Bowers Realty. Urban renewal came in 1959 and the city of Dayton bought our family farm; by then my parents had purchased their own home on Wisconsin Blvd. My father (Elmer) was a WWII veteran, a Tuskegee airman who worked construction and then later became the first African-American firefighter at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. He retired as Asst. Division Chief of the Base Fire Department.

My uncle Plato Hill (also a WWII veteran who was drafted into the military while attending Ohio State studying veterinary science) and my grandmother then purchased an 80-acre farm in Jefferson Township. The farming operation was expanded to well over 200 hogs; after

five years they purchased another 95-acre farm on Olt Road and continued to do truck farming while he worked full-time as an electrician at Delco Products. Most weekends and school vacations found me on the farm, working side by side with my beloved Uncle Plato, a modern-day slave driver.

As my mother built her real estate career, I became aware of redlining and the fact that lending institutions in Dayton did not make loans to minorities to purchase homes. I rode with my mother many times to banks in Cincinnati on Vine Street to seek home loans for minorities in Dayton. There were some stores in downtown Dayton where we could shop, but who did not hire black employees. There were other places that discouraged or prohibited black folks' business, particularly restaurants and eateries. W.S. Macintosh led the civil rights protest in downtown Dayton to open up all businesses to minorities. When desegregation came in the mid-60s it allowed black people to purchase homes in predominantly white areas, particularly Westwood, Residence Park and Dayton View. My mother often had to show homes at night because of the sensitivity of neighborhood desegregation issue. **"WHITE FLIGHT" DROVE WHITES TO THE SUBURBS AS BLACK**

**PEOPLE GAINED ACCESS TO FORMERLY ALL-WHITE COMMUNITIES. DAYTON, OHIO REMAINED ONE OF THE MOST SEGREGATED CITIES IN AMERICA FOR MANY YEARS.** As integration took effect by allowing black people to move into certain areas and to shop in stores which once barred them, we began to lose the economic value we had in our community. Black-owned businesses that once thrived in our community were shuttered.

In the late 60s, West Dayton was torn apart by race riots, and never fully recovered. Also, as a possible by-product of the Vietnam War and returning veterans, West Dayton began to experience a heroin addiction that flowed throughout the community like wildfire. People were dying from overdoses and those that were caught with the syringe or drugs were put into prison. There was no treatment for the addiction or sympathy towards those who were using heroin. In 1970 Dr. Abdur Zafr began Project Cure in order to deal with the heroin addiction ravaging West Dayton. Project cure is operational even today, and is building a new facility in Moraine, Ohio. Heroin was an epidemic in the black communities in the 60s and 70s. No one seemed to be concerned about it like they are today because it was an "inner-city" problem. Now that it's affecting rural and suburban communities,

everyone is concerned. Unfortunately, the opportunity to learn and better understand heroin addiction before it became widely available and reached “epidemic” status, was lost. It’s going to be difficult, if not impossible, to deal with today’s drug users because the drugs on the street now are a lot more powerful than they were in the 60s and 70s, and a lot more deadly. Suburban and rural communities across the United States may lose at least a generation and a half, maybe two before the drug problem is brought under control. **WHITES ARE THE PREDOMINANT USERS, AND BLACKS ARE THE STREET SELLERS WHO ARE BEING LOST (AGAIN) TO THE PRISON INDUSTRY.** I am a firm believer that to stop this drug epidemic and horrendous loss of human capital, we need to legalize drugs in the United States. Set up government clinics to treat people and control the drug usage, and take the profiteering out of the black market sale of drugs. In order to stop the multi-billion dollar illegal drug industry in this country, the profit motive must be removed. In a capitalist society, that’s the only hope.

We still see the lingering effects of problems in our community that began in the mid-60s. **NOT ONLY IS THERE BLIGHT IN THE COMMUNITY, BUT IT HAS ALSO BECOME A “FOOD DESERT”.** This means there is no full-line grocery store within

a one-mile radius. **NOT ONLY HAVE TWO-PARENT FAMILIES DISAPPEARED, BUT THE FIBER OF VALUES HAS COMPLETELY ERODED.** Values and morals that we were taught as youth growing up in Dayton have vanished. Sadly, parents and children today are concerned only about “what is good for me” with no thought given to their fellow man, to the greater good, or to doing the right thing.

In 1971, I graduated from Chaminade High School and began my college career. Upon my graduation I returned to Dayton Ohio, married and began raising a family on Wisconsin Blvd., next door to the house I grew up in and where we lived for the next 18 years. It was an inner-city neighborhood where many of my childhood friends also returned to raise their families or to visit parents who still lived there. It was a supportive village that taught my children how to succeed in life. Many neighbors helped watch over and correct them. The housing projects and apartments nearby helped them see the realities (and choices) of everyday life. Thankfully, all our children are college graduates with professional careers, as are many of the kids (and grandkids) from Wisconsin Blvd. That inner-city neighborhood yielded many productive citizens who continue to contribute to our society.

My first job after graduation was a psychotherapist at a local community mental health center. I was invited to join a neighborhood organization that focused on community gardening. It was called the Edgemont coalition. I now work as executive director for Edgemont Coalition to address the food desert issues in our area. The Edgemont Neighborhood Coalition has vowed to turn this situation around one neighborhood at a time. We are going into neighborhood schools, starting 4-H clubs and introducing the children to proper nutrition and urban farming. Working with local business partners and colleges we are in the process of developing green technology jobs that will empower the community economically. **I STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT URBAN FARMING WILL INTRODUCE A NEW GENERATION TO WORKING WITH THE SOIL AND UNDERSTANDING HOW TO GROW PRODUCE, FLOWERS, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING CARE OF THE EARTH, WHILE INCORPORATING VALUES AND MORALS THEY CAN USE TO LIVE BY.**