

# Berri McBride Interview Transcript

My name is Berri McBride. My middle name is Thomas, and I'm named after my grandfather.

I grew up in Austin. I'm a native of Austin. And this particular home that I live in now, when I was growing up, belonged to my aunt and uncle, and they lived here and bought this home when it was brand new in 1957.

And it's a ranch style mid-century home, as many of the homes in this neighborhood are. And of course, I was a youngster at the time, around 6 or 7 years old. And my parents and my family, we live nearby over on Coletto Street, and this particular home was always a wonderful gathering place for all of our family, for different events.

And whenever we didn't host things in our own home, over on Coletto Street, my aunt and uncle would host affairs here as well. And she was a teacher here, my aunt was. And my uncle owned a service station here, and they were very active in the community. And my aunt, who lived here, was a teacher at the original LC Anderson High School.

And the LC Anderson High School was the only high school in Austin that for many years, African-Americans could attend. And she was one of the last surviving teachers of that school when she passed. We always loved going to football games there and events there because it was very much in the minds of everyone in the East Austin community.

It was always the place to be on Friday night football games and all kinds of other events that took place, in connection with LC Anderson High School. They were all events that you just didn't want to miss. And, in many cases, it was the one thing, in addition to churches and things of that nature where, you could expect the East Austin community to always come out and take part in it with pride.

And we did that for a long, long time. But this particular home here was one of the very first homes that was built in this Rogers Washington Holy Cross Heights neighborhood. And, as you can see, all the lots, they're all filled in. But this was one of the very first ones that was done, that was completed. And when they moved in, the street was a rocky road.

And not only that, since they were one of the first ones to move in, virtually all the other lots had not been sold, and there were only a few homes that had been built here at the time. And I can remember, there was the Holy Cross Hospital, which was here and had a major impact on East Austin.

It had just been completed just a few years earlier, and it was a major asset to this community.

And at the time, it was the only major hospital where African-Americans could receive medical services that were affordable. But at the same time, the services provided by the hospital were complete, they were thorough, and they were first rate provided by superb doctors, including African-American doctors.

But it was a wonderful community when it was originally built, and it remains so even to this very day. And we want to make sure that our neighborhood and all those connected with it and who remember it, can make sure that it is preserved for future generations so that they will know the significance of the homes in this neighborhood, and also the significance of the hospital, which was at the same time called Holy Cross Hospital. Hence, the name of this neighborhood is "Rogers Washington Holy Cross."

The Rogers Washington part of the name comes from the fact that the original developers of the lots where all of these homes were built on were African Americans and they were developers. One was named Mr. Rogers, and the other one was Doctor Washington. So the name of the neighborhood became, and is to this day Rogers Washington Holy Cross Historic District neighborhood now.

And we became a historic district, in 2022, I believe, a couple of years ago. And you'll see it on all the signs, right above all the street signs, "Historic Rogers Washington Holy Cross neighborhood."

It is the only neighborhood in all of East Austin that bears that historic district designation. So we're very proud of that. And when it comes to being raised in East Austin, I can't think of a better place to have been raised in and gotten my education in and also matriculated, ultimately to the University of Texas, which is one of this country's major educational institutions.

That matriculation to the University of Texas may not have ever happened had I not been educated and grew up in East Austin and received the outstanding education at L.L. Campbell, which is up the street here, but it was in a different location at the time. It was over on Chicon Street at the time, where it was originally built.

Having gotten educated in East Austin in the beginning and matriculated on to other schools, University Junior High School and then on to Austin High and then to the University of Texas, that matriculation and that trajectory had a lot to do with the fact that I was born and raised in East Austin – which is an area where, truly, the idea of the phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child" – surely the meaning of that was put into effect when we were growing up.

And that's something that, hopefully will be, will continue to be replicated, because it does take a village. And this community certainly was a true village where folks looked out for each other, and the effects of that shows in the kinds of adults that we came to be.

And not only that, hopefully the legacy, what we leave behind and what we hope contributes to the growth and to the significance that Austin now is projecting to the world, has a lot to do with the fact that many of us came from East Austin and who have contributed to the success of this great city.

How the village affects me, and how did it assist me in helping me achieve my goals and to contribute to some of the success that I've had and contribute to my life growing up – I can talk about that.

And I'd be happy to because the idea of having a future that I can now look back on, I can truthfully say that a lot of what I've achieved and what I've been able to succeed with had a lot to do with the teachers, the parents, the churches, the schools, the community spirit, the uniqueness of Austin from the standpoint of it being a relatively small community and also being, at the time when we were growing up, a much slower pace.

But at the same time, we had some of the same issues then when it came to segregation and when it came to the ability to move ahead in life. Our parents were, sometimes, in a difficult situation from the standpoint that jobs and things like that were not easy to come by at that time. Many of them, for lack of the opportunities that came forth after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1965 – many of those things came later in life for them, although they happened at the time we were growing up so we were able to take advantage of those significant changes of integration coming about as youngsters.

But our parents, many a time, were faced with situations where their economic progress was stymied sometimes because of the lack of integration from a business standpoint and from the standpoint of where fair housing situations were sometimes impediments to them moving ahead with maybe where they might want to choose to live or in some way, aspects of employment were sometimes denied because of the issues connected with segregation and racial strife and things of that nature.

And, as time went on and, of course, the '60s were a rather turbulent time, in Austin particularly, with the schools and the passage of certain acts, as I mentioned before, with the changes which were beginning to come about. We were faced many times with trying to figure out which direction we should take even from the standpoint of where to live and what schools to put your kids in and things of that nature.

Those decisions, while they may have been easier to deal with a generation ago, became rather complex, during the '60s and '70s. So much so, where integration, while it did move ahead fairly smoothly in Austin, for some families it wasn't that easy of a road to travel because of wanting to maintain our own ethnic history at the same time, but also understanding that progress sometimes means that we might have to come out of our shell and go down paths that have never been gone down before and to try to adapt to things that the world was saying that we must adapt to if we wanted to achieve the greatness that this country could provide.

But fortunately, I had very, very astute parents from the standpoint of them wanting to do everything that they possibly could for their kids and for themselves as well.

And by the way, I wanted to mention that I have two siblings. I have a brother and a sister. My brother is older, who became a lawyer, and my sister got her PhD. We're all well educated. And when it comes to that, I still want to go back and and say because we are, that had much to do with the upbringing that we had right here in East Austin and the schools that we went to, the churches that we went to, the village that helped to raise us.

As I mentioned, my aunt and uncle owned this home. Well, in addition to my parents making sure that we got our schoolwork and made sure that we toed the line when it came to the way we moved through the world and moved through society and respected adults and that type of thing.

All of that took a village to be able to keep us under control and to keep the reins pretty tight, because they knew that things were a'changing, and that it was time to make sure that we understood that if we were going to have the best life that we could possibly be able to have, given all these changes that were going to be coming about in the very near future – which they did, even more so than what they ever thought that they would.

They wanted to make sure that we were best prepared, and they did prepare us and help us to become prepared very, very well. And I'm very thankful for all that they did.

There were places like that, and one of the major places like that in Austin was a place that some of you may know and that was Rosewood Park, the large center there, which is still there to this day – the community center there on the park that's on Rosewood Avenue.

That is where we gathered many times to talk about the situations that we were involved in and how to deal with and navigate through some of the issues that we were having at the time – but also, churches have always been a major focal point, particularly in the African-American community, when it came to dealing with issues connected with our progress in society and in the world.

And schools, LC Anderson High School was also a major meeting place for discussions and things of that nature. And of course, individual meetings at households and things of that nature. But there was always a community spirit in East Austin so that regardless of whatever it was that the community was facing, overall, there were always great leaders in our community who always stepped up to the plate and gave of themselves and participated in whatever that needed to be done.

They even did this at the point of sometimes risking their lives, in some cases, to speak up and to make sure that if there was a grievance of any kind that affected our community or a

particular individual or family, to a major degree, all of us could feel like we had great leaders in the community that would stand up for us and make sure that our grievances were not overlooked, and that they were dealt with appropriately and reprimanded where reprimand was the answer to it in some way.

We had the protection that we needed, and there was always a community spirit to where if a meeting or a communal spirit aspect of coming together to deal with something collectively, there was always a place available to where such meetings, that were needed at the time, could be and were held.

One of the specific encounters would be where – the city of Austin, in the late 1950s, and early 1960s, decided it did want to consider integration and integrating the schools. And at that time, none of the schools in Austin were integrated at all. Everything was very, very segregated and separated educationally.

Well, because of the fight that our parents put up with the Austin Independent School District, and with the advent of society, in general, moving into the direction to where we wanted to make the country live up to its aspirations and to the goals that are set forth in the Constitution – we felt it was time for the city of Austin to integrate schools and to allow students and kids to be able to attend schools that were not necessarily better suited for them, but would provide them with as good of an education as they could get, even in segregated schools, if not better.

So we were on the first wave of schools in Austin to integrate, and the school that integrated first in Austin was University Junior High School. That was the very first school to integrate here in Austin, and it was a middle school. It is the middle school that all of them, my siblings and I went to. And you may not know this and you may not be aware of this, but that school was on Red River Street and it was on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin.

That was the junior high school that we went to. It was on the campus. It was called University Junior High School. It was opened up originally in the late 1930s, but integrated in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And it was seventh through ninth grades. And that's where we went to junior high school.

And that was one of the very first situations where a fight was put forth by the community to open the schools up and allow the schools to integrate and to move forward. Thurgood Marshall himself was very, very influential. This is before he became Supreme Court justice. Long before that, he helped integrate the University of Texas Law School, the school itself, and then he helped us to get these schools here in Austin integrated, beginning with University Junior High School.

And my siblings and myself were on that first wave of schools to be integrated in Austin, beginning with the integration of University Junior High School, which still exists to this day, although it operates now as the School of Social Work on the campus of the University of Texas.

The community spirit and what was it like after integration first happened? Well, it was something that everyone not necessarily was in agreement with, even in the African-American and minority community or in the Hispanic community, for that matter.

Many wanted to keep the schools the way they were, and keep it to where we would all have the experience of attending historically African-American schools and going on to historically African-American colleges and things of that nature. But that was not the case with everyone.

The fortunate thing about that is, regardless of which side of the fence you were on when it came to that subject, everyone still came together and it was all recognized as something that would allow for the betterment of our community for us to not be so homogenous – and to spread out and become a lot more heterogenous in our society like the world is.

And we're not a monolith, and we shouldn't be, and those situations should not be treated monolithically, meaning that it shouldn't be where everyone continues to do the same thing and be the same thing and do things the same way simply because you've always done that for decades and for centuries.

And that is the way that it was presented. And not only that, we can now look back on that and see that, for example, this community has folks in it, including myself, where we all come from various walks of life, from the standpoint of the kinds of educations and the kinds of lives that we've had.

And many of us went to integrated schools, many of us went to historically African-American schools. And all of us get along and all of us are very proud of the roads that we took. We can see the benefits of all of our experiences and can see that our varied experiences are helping us move ahead in the direction that we're attempting to go now.

And I think things would be a lot different if we all had the same kinds of lives growing up, which we didn't. Many of us had different ways that we approached our lives, and now we can see the benefits of it all now that we've come back and are living in that community now as third and fourth generations now. We can see the progress that we made based upon the varied kinds of experiences that all of us have had.

What impact does this neighborhood have on others? I think this particular neighborhood has a larger impact on others now, and I'm emphasizing *now*, because we've made a conscious effort to not only become an official historic neighborhood, but we've also made a very conscious effort to make sure that it's known citywide that we are a historic neighborhood – meaning that Preservation Austin, which is a major preservation group in the city of Austin, which recognizes neighborhoods and individuals and properties from a historic standpoint, has done several videos of our neighborhood and presented them on television, including on PBS.

So our neighborhood gets a lot of play from the standpoint of the media presentation of this particular neighborhood. Not only that, we get a lot of feedback from others who have seen the films and presentations, and even those films and presentations have been picked up with other various kinds of media, such as the Austin American-Statesman and other journalistic sources to present things about this particular neighborhood.

And I'm saying that because it's this particular neighborhood that gets a lot more play than maybe some others because of the uniqueness of where it's located and because of the uniqueness of the work and the effort that we as a neighborhood have put forth in order to make sure that it gets a historic designation associated with it.

Because it truly is historic from a number of perspectives, including, and in many cases, the developers of the property, the architects who designed the homes, the owners of the homes, and many of these homes in this neighborhood are still occupied by members within the same family. They may be generations later than the original owners who occupied the property, but they're within that same family.

Our family – this property is one of those properties. I'm the next generation from my uncle and aunt, and from my own parents, and this property after it was built, like I said, in 1957. About almost 75 years now, it's still in our family, and it will remain in our family for generations to come.

And that is also the case with others who live in this neighborhood. And the important thing about that is, when these homes were built and when they were initially occupied by the original residents, no one could have foreseen the growth of Austin and the diversity of Austin and this neighborhood that has ultimately come about.

So it has been bequeathed to us as this current generation, witnessing all of these changes, witnessing all of this diversity, witnessing all of this gentrification, to make sure that the history and legacy of this area not only is preserved, but first of all, that it is memorialized first and foremost, and that it is written about, it is filmed, it is captured in various forms of media, and then preserved and made sure that the protection of and preservation of this legacy is preserved for future generations, so that people can see that Austin, when it came to the issue of gentrification and diversification, this is what this area did.

They didn't just roll over and fall dead and just say, "Okay, just let it happen," and then let all of this get erased.

No, we took it upon ourselves to make sure that we did something about this, and we got ahead of all of this and made sure that we slowed it all down and that we captured everything. From the standpoint of the history and the legacy that was to be made here by the owners of these homes and the sacrifices that they made, not only to own these homes and pay the mortgages and pay them off, but to preserve the neighborhood and to make sure that this community

remains a vital community.

We can see now the importance of it and also the importance of Holy Cross Hospital. I was the person who took it upon himself to prepare all of the written narratives and work that was done for Holy Cross Hospital, to make sure that the history of that hospital was preserved and not forgotten. All of that is now memorialized in the work that I submitted to the City of Austin, to Travis County Historic District, to the Travis County Historic District, and to the State of Texas Historic District for a historical marker memorializing the history of that hospital, to make sure that its history, along with this neighborhood, is not forgotten.

So the city, and the county, and the state of Texas Historic Commission approved my request for a historical marker, and they're working on the wording for the marker. Now, ultimately, their marker, the historical marker, will go right in front of that remaining hospital building there, right in front of this house on the street is where that marker will be, memorializing the hospital itself, talking about its history, the significance of it, how it all came about when it opened, when it closed, why it closed, and what vital services that it provided during the time that it was in existence.

So to answer your question much more broadly than specifically, all those kinds of things were important, and we took it upon ourselves to proactively take the bull by the reins, so to speak, to make sure that our history is not only memorialized, but that it is captured and preserved. We want it to be so that future generations cannot ignore and will not have to be faced with the fact that we were here, but they don't see any remnants of what we did while we were here.

We are capturing all of that and making sure that it is all preserved for future generations to come.

I hope I understand your question. I think what you're asking me is, "What has it been like to have to do that [applying for historic designation]?" Well, it hasn't been easy, but at the same time, with the passion that others like myself have, particularly those of us who live in this neighborhood, it's almost like second nature.

No one wants to just let it all happen. None of us do. And we can see that we're all sort of cut from the same cloth from the standpoint of having been raised in this community. Many of us who have now come back to live in it, we all sort of have the same objectives in mind. So much so to where, we fortunately have a neighborhood group here where we have our neighborhood meetings, which are usually zoom meetings.

They're done digitally. They're all very well attended and full of substance. We're not not talking about parties and things of a social nature. We're talking about political things and things that are going to help preserve the area, to continue to progress down the road of making sure our objectives for preservation and memorialization are achieved.



But at the same time, we're also trying to make other kinds of contributions to individuals and families when they're needed. So we have a number of different major purposes and sub-purposes of our neighbor group and its objectives, and so much so to where our attendance and having people at those meetings is not a problem. Other neighborhood groups may have, maybe one or two members that might attend to have to stick up for the entire neighborhood

Ours are not necessarily always fully attended, but we do have a large number of folks who regularly attend and actively participate in our neighborhood group and our meetings and the things that we're trying to achieve as a group and what we're trying to achieve independently.

And if we have an issue independently that we are involved in and need some help with, many times the first persons that we talk with are members in our neighbor group that we have discussed in that meeting about our particular issue. And we get feedback from them, because many times I have found that our neighbors, our neighborhood and our neighbors being so close with each other – we get our best and most supportive feedback and assistance from the very people who live in our neighborhood, just a street or two over from where we live.

It's still active, particularly in this community. Yes sir. And that also has a direct relationship to the proximity of this particular neighborhood not only to downtown, but to the University of Texas. And because those two aspects of Central Texas and this community affect us all in many ways, the university being as powerful and as large as it is, and then the City of Austin and its dominant political forces, they affect us all as well. So we, from a geographic standpoint, sort of sit in the eye of all of that being so close in proximity to downtown and to the university.

Virtually nothing really happens in the city, for the most part, that isn't somehow bringing us into the situation from the standpoint of it being connected with either the university or the City of Austin, and us physically and geographically being where we're located. We're always going to be affected by it in some ways. So we should actively participate and be involved in it, because we can assist other neighborhoods that are maybe further away but still are going to be impacted.

But many times because of where we are in particular, this particular neighbor group, in particular, some of the other neighbor groups that are further out here in East Austin look to us sometimes for help and assistance and for our guidance because of who we are and what we have achieved.

As far as East Austin is concerned, we sometimes can be looked upon as providing some kind of a leadership role for those, still, associated and still who live in East Austin.

It's different now, I would say. But on the other hand, it's different in many ways because of the leadership role that we have begun to assume. Because one thing that I did notice when I first moved back to Austin, the neighborhood group wasn't as proactive then. This was about four or five years ago, as it has now become.

And once we began to understand the significance and importance of our neighborhood, after we began discussing it in our neighborhood meetings, and when it was brought up that maybe we should start looking at the idea that we are unique when it comes to how we are viewed, in relation to other neighborhoods, and we should take advantage of it, and we should pursue getting a historic designation for the neighborhood – that caught on like fire after it was discussed in one of our meetings early on when I first moved back.

And we never let go of those reins. And as a result of that, the leadership role that we have now attained, in comparison to other neighborhood groups, has a lot to do with the fact that we recognized, within ourselves the significance of what we have here.

And particularly when I started to do the work in connection with preserving the history of the hospital and then realizing that the two names, Rogers and Washington – they were developers who developed this land. They didn't build the houses, they developed the land and got the lots prepared for the builders who built these homes, and they were African-Americans.

And we recognized that we have something very, very special here. And when we began to notice that, we began to realize that we needed to take advantage of this and not necessarily exploit it, from an economic standpoint, but we need to get the word out and use it to help preserve the history of the neighborhood and to do things which can contribute to the City of Austin and to our community overall and to East Austin in particular, by virtue of the newfound spirit, that has now come about by all of us in this neighborhood.

And over the last four or five years, I've seen our neighborhood group and its spirit just increase exponentially by all the things that we've achieved recently. And it's going to continue to do that for years to come down the road.

Well, one of the major things is, of course, the housing affordability aspects of Austin, in particular, is an issue here. And we are doing everything we can to do our share of helping to preserve not only the history of homes and properties in Austin, in East Austin. But we are doing everything we also can to make sure that the knowledge of affordability of homes and how to make them affordable and how to make sure that developers who develop affordable housing look to areas of Austin to develop their affordable housing properties in.

Now, Austin is a city where the opportunity to make money abounds when it comes to real estate and things of that nature. But there is a way that things can be done to where affordability of properties and affordability of homes and apartments can be taken into account when developers build certain properties. We do our part in wanting to make sure that developers consider not only just developing and building properties, but building them with the idea of them, in the end, becoming affordable and becoming reasonably priced, and done in a way that preserves history, in some way or another.

But at the same time, whatever is done, we are hoping that it maintains its ability to allow the average American or the typical American, that is not in the higher economic groups, to be able to afford them so that Austin becomes more of a city that recognizes the significance of its diversity. And part of that diversity that Austin has has a lot to do with, properties remaining affordable so that people can afford to live here.

Otherwise, that unique feature of Austin, meaning its diversity and the unique aspects of what makes Austin, that can be eroded upon gradually if people just can't afford to live here. That has happened in some areas of the country, such as an area that I used to live in, which is San Francisco. I lived there in the first part of my career, after I got my degree from the University of Texas. It is now a city that is almost impossible to even afford a one bedroom apartment in.

We don't want Austin to become that. It can become that if we're not careful in making sure that we do all that we can as a community and as individuals and as an interested party in wanting to maintain affordability. So we must continue to do our share to make sure that we do all that we can to insist on the affordability of housing in Austin, no matter who is developing the property and no matter where it is.

Part of the legacy I would want to make sure that we do is to make sure, in my particular case, I'm making sure that my role as the progenitor and the founder and as the major cause of the historic designation of the hospital, want to make sure that that gets done.

One of the things that you'll notice is when it comes to those buildings across the street, it's very unfortunate that now, they've been sitting there so long, unprotected that there's graffiti all over those buildings there. And those buildings are historic. They really are. But you would never know it, given all the color and the graffiti that's written on them.

Now, one of the things I'm pushing now to do is to make sure that we let the the current owners of that building, which is the Austin Cancer Center, making sure that we get rid of that graffiti and then, ultimately, the State of Texas and the County of Travis get our historic designation markers in front of the property so that we begin to show the fact that there was a hospital there for decades and that it meant a lot to our community and to the City of Austin.

And then in addition to that, we want to make sure that we continue to improve our area here, this particular neighborhood, making sure that, these particular streets here always well maintained and that the neighborhood, and the character of the neighborhood, maintains the original character that it always had when these homes were first built, and that our historic requirements when it comes to any work being done on the homes in this neighborhood.

Making sure that future owners of these homes, if they happen to be folks that are investing in these homes, if they're sold to investors later on, that they keep in mind that they have historic architectural requirements that they must meet in order to preserve the historic character of these homes the way they were originally built.

In other words, future buyers of these homes, if they're ever sold outside of the original families, will have to sort of toe the line when it comes to what they decide to do to improve their properties. If they're going to be modifying them in certain ways, they have to, make sure that they adhere to our publicly approved designations of the rules and the requirements that they must meet, all of which were put in force by us to make sure that we have stringent requirements that must be met in order to preserve the story character of these homes, the way they were originally built in the 1950s and early 1960s.

So part of our legacy is to make sure that we have all of that in place, which we are about to get done now, and to make sure that we enforce them and not just have them as rules that are unenforced. So if they're unenforced, then what was the reason why you put them in effect in the first place?

We will make sure that we enforce them, and we'll make sure that we do all that we can, during our lifetimes, to maintain the character of this neighborhood the way they were originally built in the first place. And as we came along, and put forth these requirements, we'll make sure that the requirements that were put forth are dealt with and are met appropriately.

And where we continue to have a very nice, well diversified neighborhood in the center of Austin that all of us and future generations can continually enjoy.