

Brenda Malik Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Elisa Calderon

Interviewee: Brenda Malik

My name is Brenda Malik. I am part of the Rogers Washington Holy Cross Neighborhood Association. I was the president of the association for six or seven years now. So I'm a former president. I have lived in this neighborhood since 1961, when the house was first built. I was nine years old at the time, and I remember coming into the house feeling very good because this was a new addition at the time.

We came off of 12th Street before we moved into this house. And 12th Street, we lived in a two story house, which was right next to the Gulf service station that Mr. Anderson ran, and across the street from the Harlem Theater. So I had my way with the neighborhood because I could go down to the grocery store, get me some barbecue, which was right off of 12th and Chicon, at the time. That was the grocery store there.

But right next to the grocery store was a newsstand, and he sold the comics. And I could go and buy a comic book for 10, 15 cents. I take that comic book to the Harlem Theater and the beautiful young lady in the booth, everybody knew her and loved her – she was so pretty – she would let me give her the comic book to read.

Well, I could go into the movie theater and I didn't have to buy a ticket, so when I came out, I'd get my comic book, go across the street to the Gulf Station, and Mr. Anderson would give me a free ice cream cone that he had in his little freezer, and I'd go home and make my siblings jealous.

It's a homegrown community, so I've always been involved. Our mothers started the association as soon as we got here. So this community was really built with a lot of black professionals at the time. Teachers, nurses, elected officials. And so those women were the driving force of creating the neighborhood association, and they'd go from house to house with the monthly meetings.

So it was a party every month, and the neighbors would get together, and the children would watch and see what they were doing. So I was one of those that grew up in the association, and I became more active when I became an adult.

Oh, these women were civic minded. They were always doing something with their children.

For instance, they would take us down to the skating rink and protest the segregation of the skating rink that they couldn't take their children in. Went to Zilker Pool and protested there too, or they picked us up and took us to the movies and it was always a communal kind of thing.

And since we all went to school together on the East Side, because it was segregated then too, we knew each other from school or from church. So it was in the neighborhood.

My family moved here to Austin from San Angelo, Texas. And I can say that my father was the first black principal of an integrated high school in Texas, Central High in San Angelo.

So he was always an advocate for integration. And he moved the family here so that we could take part and take advantage of the University of Texas and all of the other academic advantages here in Austin. So we moved here for that.

But every holiday, I can remember my mother making special, and sometimes I think that my friends thought we were rich, but that was so wrong. We were not, but my mother tried to make holidays special, and we tried to make sure that everyone in the neighborhood was taken care of. She was a teacher, an elementary school teacher at Rosewood Elementary. So it was always a tradition of ours to make sure people were taken care of.

I was nine years old and I was a little down because I didn't think anybody really cared. But, they were actually planning a surprise party for me. And they had built a swing in the backyard. And everybody came over and I was totally surprised they kept a good secret. So I remember that birthday very well.

It was a lot of fun. And I had a good time. Birthdays were special, but not everybody had the means to celebrate big every year. So that was a big one for me. I remember my older sister had a sweet sixteen party, which was a big deal, because it was a Coca Cola party. So I don't know if you guys remember the Coca Cola bottles, and everybody had a Coke in their hands and we were just amazed we had a Coca Cola party.

So that was a big deal around here, but not all of us were able to celebrate that way all the time. So that was special.

We would race down the street every summer, that was a tradition. That the kids would go up the hill and we'd race down the hill.

And we kind of passed that along to the other generations, too. They'd go up the hill and race down the hill, and so that was handed down. It was a lot of fun. It was impromptu. And especially in those days, the kids weren't allowed to just stay inside. In fact, they had to go outside and leave the grownups alone inside, but you better be back inside before the streetlight came on.

But it's so not happening today, but it was so much fun to play outside and those generations after me found out my sons were playing outside. You don't see the kids as much anymore, but we do have a family of children on Weber Avenue. They play outside. I hear them giggling and screaming and running down the street and it just warms my heart to know that at least there's one family still doing that in 2023.

Well, there are not as many young children now, but it's a more diversified community. So we've got university students living next door. We've got a fifth generation living across the street, and we've got a big family of six living up the street and we try to get to know our neighbors.

So that's the change because we knew our neighbors 10, 15 years ago. Everybody knew each other, and that's how we kept the family together because it takes a village.

Juneteenth was always a park event. So everyone in the neighborhood here joined other neighborhoods along MLK, Chicon, and Rosewood when the parade would come down the street. And then we'd all gather after the parade at Rosewood Park, which was our emancipation park, and everyone would get to see everyone that you ever knew growing up at that park.

And we love to mingle like that and know each other, and know that we're still a family and we're still here. And the community is still vibrant, and you get your red soda and barbecue and get to know your other neighbors. It was just all kinds of games going on. There was a baseball game in the park. There was music on the other side. And Juneteenth was such a wonderful occasion for the neighborhood.

Not growing up, but as I became a wage earner at Austin Energy, I was part of a group of folks that made sure that the parade was well supported. So we'd have our cars and trucks and, and we'd also make sure that the city council was there with the cars that they were driving in, we'd make their signs, put it on the doors and we'd be a very big part of that.

I try not to be in the sun so much as I'm aging, but Huston-Tillotson University has started partnering with that celebration. So we're able to not only go to Rosewood Park, but also go to the HT Grounds, the historic black college, and do some of the same things there. So there would be a new generation of young folks there, people who we might not have met otherwise.

So it's a way of combining a lot of community. Weber Avenue, where we are, is a cul de sac, so it was kind of protected. And we didn't have to worry about a lot of traffic, and so the kids could play here a lot. So they'd run down that hill and try to race each other. It didn't really matter who won, but it was just the running of the hill.

And our houses, actually, there was a creek, Bullden Creek, that went through it. Our mothers spent a lot of time at council meetings trying to convince them that that needed to be covered because it was just a ditch.

The guys, the boys in the neighborhood, loved the ditch because they could go down there and go through the pipes and my son revealed to me earlier, late in his life, that they used to go all the way through to MLK and beyond through the pipes.

I'm like, "What?"

Fortunately, they lived to tell the story, but the mothers were not happy about that ditch, and so we finally got it covered. And there were trees put there, and so you don't, you don't see that ditch anymore. But it was an eyesore and it was also fading away. Every rain, more ground was going into the ditch.

So it was a safety hazard as well. So the city finally acquiesced and covered it up. It was 1978 when the streets were paved, so that was not long ago. I was actually working in Council Member Jimmy Snell's office at the time, and my council member lived on Givens, the next street over, but we brought all of the department heads together in a meeting at Carver Library and requested that all of the streets be paved, finally.

And they did so. That's a short time ago that that happened. You'd think it was always the way, but it was not. And it was pressure from this group of folks that made it happen. Also Ms. Kirk was instrumental in getting the branch library moved over to East Austin where the Carver Museum now stands.

It was the main library, until they got another building there. So she asked that that be placed in East Austin as a branch library. It was the first branch library in Austin. So this community has been very active for a very long time in getting services and improvements done to the neighborhood and the whole East Austin sector.

We had quite a few leaders over here in this neighborhood, come from this neighborhood, including Mr. Snell, who was the first black Travis County Commissioner. But that was after his stint at the Austin City Council.

We also had the first black mayor of Dallas come from this neighborhood. Ms. Kirk's son, Ronald Kirk, was the first black mayor of Dallas, Texas, and went on to become appointed an ambassador in Obama's presidency. And they became good friends as well. So it was a bunch of leaders because we had the professionals come from this area.

And like today, it's hard for Black and brown people to get to these meetings and put that pressure on our elected officials because we're working. So it was a little bit easier for professional folks in this area to take up that mantle and fight for civil rights. But this whole community has been active in civil rights here in Austin.

King-Tears Mortuary is part of the legacy of this neighborhood. And Dr. King lives also on the street over.

General Dr. King was the past president of Huston-Tillotson College. He was co-founder of King-Tears Mortuary. But yes, he's a descendant of one of our presidents. Most definitely L.C. Anderson High was an iconic building. It was the only high school that Blacks were allowed to go to before integration.

And I used to sit on my porch in the back of L.C. Anderson and listen to the halftime shows because I was a little girl. And I could just hear the drum beats and it was so wonderful to hear that rhythm. And I vowed at age eight that I would go to L.C. Anderson when I had a chance.

Now, my brother, older brother and sister were part of the bussing that took place in the early '60s or the mid '60s, and they were bussed to Austin High. And I watched them and it didn't feel like they were all that happy going to Austin High as part of that experiment. So when it came time for me to go to high school, I said, "No, I want to go to Anderson."

Like I've always wanted to go to Anderson and be a yellow jacket. And I was so glad that they let me do that. Because I was able to participate in so many things. And it was a school of excellence. So all of the teachers and principals made sure that they pushed us into excellence at every level.