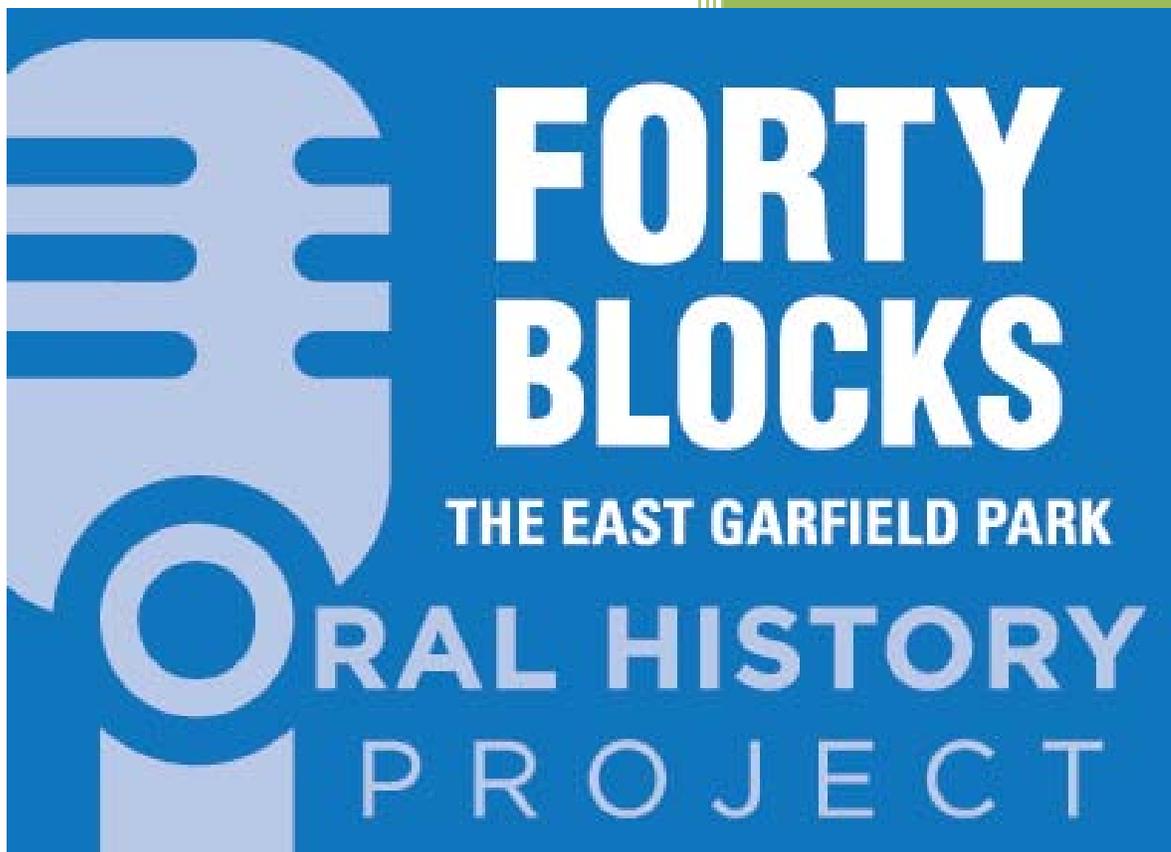


Honors Senior Thesis

Vanishing Perspectives: Preserving Lost History



Yasmin Zacaria Mitchel

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Rachel Shteir, Thesis Director,

The Theatre School

Cheryl Bachand, Faculty Reader,

History of Art and Architecture

In January, I entered the [Chicago History Museum](#) as an intern. Although I had spent the previous quarter as a student in the same building, I was given the opportunity to function in a different capacity. The project I had volunteered to work on was rooted in a Chicago neighborhood I knew nothing about: East Garfield Park. A simple Google search of the neighborhood pulled up articles and statistics about violent crimes and gentrification. The mainstream media overwhelmingly portrays this community as crime-ridden and poverty-stricken, as it is among Chicago neighborhoods with the most violent crimes per capita. I quickly immersed myself in research, wondering how the community had gotten to its current rankings. I soon realized I was not alone in my curiosity.

In February, when I drove through East Garfield Park for the first time, I thought that there was some merit to the media's portrayal. I saw abandoned storefronts, boarded up homes, rusted cars, and immense litter. I questioned how much of a productive impact an oral history project could make. Issues concerning gentrification and racism could not be solved in the course of six months. I wondered if there was some sort of a community intervention that combated such prejudice and unfair distribution of resources, or even if there was an organization that alleviated aspects of hardship. After all, the residents, art activists, coaches, and community leaders had chosen to stay in this neighborhood despite negative media portrayal, true hardships, and devastation.

In short, I was right. For decades, East Garfield Park organizations and residents have tried to rewrite the mainstream media's portrayal of their community with art activism, cultural history, and performative storytelling. Although it is unlikely that these forms of expression will significantly transform the infrastructure of East Garfield Park, the sharing of internal

community insight and generating of solutions is the first step towards breaking down stereotypes.

This past year, CHM joined in this endeavor. I was part of this collaborative initiative, [*Forty Blocks: The East Garfield Park Oral History Project*](#). CHM partnered with [Breakthrough](#), a non-profit, social service provider in the neighborhood to gain entry into the neighborhood while acting as a cultural broker. Breakthrough has worked in the neighborhood since the late 1990s and has broad connections through its passionate leaders and volunteers. Breakthrough's amenities include both a women's and men's shelter, a food pantry, clinic, youth programming, and extracurricular activities no longer offered in middle and high schools. This partnership allowed us to capture a lost history, discuss difficult topics, and document decades of previously unrecorded history.

Back in April 2015, CHM and Breakthrough began developing this collaborative oral history project. When previous research conducted by DePaul interns and CHM oral history center staff uncovered a lack of documentation of East Garfield Park's history, they connected it to the riots after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. What we knew about East Garfield Park is that it played a significant role in the shaping of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1966, during the Chicago Freedom Movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led by King visited East Garfield Park and other Chicago neighborhoods. That same year, King even lived close to East Garfield Park in the West Side community of North Lawndale.

King, the SCLC, neighborhood cooperative organizations, church leaders, and block clubs fought against racism in housing, education, and employment. Following King's assassination in 1968, much of the city's West and South Sides were destroyed by riots. Since

the 1970s, East Garfield Park has become synonymous with poverty and violence. When those riots ended, so did the outside world's interest in East Garfield Park and its history.

In 2015, when Breakthrough first started collaborating with the museum, the leadership was reluctant to even meet with Dr. Peter Alter, the Director of the Studs Terkel Center for Oral History--the main proponent behind the project. When reflecting on this hesitation, Alter even acknowledged the general feeling was, "Who was this middle-aged white guy?" Alter was an outsider in a community that was set on fighting its own battles against a staggering crime rate and detrimental media portrayal. Furthermore, since CHM is not easily accessible to East Garfield Park, there was little familiarity in both directions. Nevertheless, over the course of a year, Alter gained trust through sincerity and genuine curiosity. Breakthrough staff assembled a preliminary list of potential interviewees from East Garfield Park.

Interestingly enough, Alter was not the only one who struggled with his right to capture the stories of a predominately African-American neighborhood that was not his own. CHM is located in Old Town, close to Lincoln Park—both largely white neighborhoods on the North Side. It is not a surprise that many of us working on the project are white, which brought an ethical dilemma. We were six white people--DePaul students, faculty, and Breakthrough mentors opposed to one African-American—the coordinator at Breakthrough. We questioned ourselves, "What right do we have to capture these stories? What right do we have to share stories that do not belong to us?" As oral historians, our process follows the adage "Do no harm." We reconciled, the good that could come from this project outweighed the bad.

More recently, the East Garfield Park has emerged as a possible zone of gentrification and redevelopment, and residents wonder if it will become "the next Wicker Park." One way to further represent these struggles was to vary the medium by which we captured history.

Breakthrough's program Film Crew is working together to document the neighborhood's history through videography. Film Crew, which is made up of middle and high school students is a part of Breakthrough's Arts and Sciences Academy. At the beginning of each year, Breakthrough recruits, employs, and trains this group in documentary filmmaking. These young filmmakers students are mentored by film and sound professionals.

In February and March, we spent a series of Saturdays working with the Film Crew to prepare for our main oral history interviewing day. We taught Film Crew students about the community's history and also studied historical materials from CHM's archives documenting East Garfield Park's pre-1968 past. Through oral history training, Film Crew learned interviewing techniques, how to explain their project and its goals, and active listening skills.

On March 26, CHM, Breakthrough, Film Crew, and other volunteers facilitated interviews with twenty-three narrators over the course of six hours. The heart of our questions centered on what it was like to live in East Garfield Park, what made the neighborhood unique, and what hopes, dreams, and concerns residents had for the future of the neighborhood. As the day progressed, interviewing came more naturally to Film Crew. They could see the residents reliving memories of decades past, and their questions stemmed from honest curiosity. Film Crew took charge, leading the interviews and developing insightful follow-up questions, and we—the mentors—were there to step in if they got stuck.

During the interviews, we uncovered lost experiences and captured perspectives of long-time residents, community leaders, art activists, coaches, and others. We heard about familiar contemporary issues—poverty, education, gentrification, racism, police brutality, community investment, drugs, family structure, and youth involvement—but were able to historically root these problems and question the future of the neighborhood.

By recording and transcribing the stories of East Garfield Park's residents, we hope to add to the understanding of Chicago's history, African-American history, and the rich tapestry of American history. East Garfield Park's history will become known and accessible through places like the Collection Online portion of the CHM website; Film Crew documentary film will screen in CHM's Robert R. McCormick Theater in July.

As we continue to transcribe and archive the oral history interviews, there are several moments that truly impacted me. Although the interviewees had some knowledge about the project, several of them were surprised when we inquired about their childhood and the early history of East Garfield Park. A common response was, "Well, how much time do you have?" And on the other side of the table, sometimes the Film Crew students were left eyes wide, jaws agape, not knowing what their next question could be.

Two of our interviewees recalled standing on top of the Marillac House, watching the city burn during the 1968 riots. Marillac House, a prominent family services center, was one of the few buildings that survived the riots due to the efforts of Vincentian nuns locking arms around the property. Stories like these incited much emotion. Interviewees cried. The Film Crew would turn to me in despair, not knowing what else to ask, stunned that this history was still so present, and so real, even decades after the events.

Forty Blocks has played a significant role in not only sharing the stories of East Garfield Park, but contributing to understanding Chicago through the perspectives of an often overlooked community of color. While experiences differed, the resounding theme of belonging and compassion for each other and the neighborhood resonated across interviews. Although this community is known for its high crime and poverty rates, the strength and perseverance of those who make up East Garfield Park is promising. They are redefining their community through

cultural art and expression. The Golden Dome building, a major community home to the arts, houses poetry slams, traditional Igbo (Nigerian) dance classes, art studios, and cultural workshops in order to build cultural literacy. Such programming that encourages fostering a cultural identity build community pride and stamina against the forces that threaten its very existence. Similarly, social service organizations like Breakthrough provide these communities with tangible resources—in the form of youth and adult programming, interim housing, academies, as well as hope.

When considering the greater mission of oral history—this ambitious endeavor to fill in the gaps in history—it is clear that documenting is only the first step. For the real impact or change is derived from what is done with the captured history. What we have found through our project *Forty Blocks* is that East Garfield Park maintains resilience. Although we may finish this project, although it will be captured and frozen in time in the CHM archive, our work is not done. We, too, must be resilient and stand up in the face of adversity. We must find ways to magnify the voices of those who are calling for change and then generate solutions.