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Black History Through the Eyes of a Roosevelt Resident

EDISON – In modern times, Black History Month has emerged as both a chronicle of and a testament to the struggles and advancements made by the African-American community.

Eighty-nine-year-old Mary Kinsey, a Roosevelt Care Center at Edison resident and a proud African-American matriarch, has been a witness to much of those changing tides.



Kinsey graced the world on May 5, 1927 in Newark, N.J., an urban landscape hailed as one of the country's scant few melting pots.

Unlike many U.S. metropolitans of the day, Blacks, Italians, Jews, Irish and a whole medley of other ethnicities and religions worked, played and lived cohesively, side-by-side, within the Brick City limits.

In fact, in Kinsey's heyday, she knew nothing of separate bathrooms, exclusionary eating haunts or segregated schools.

In the matter of a few sentences, she summarily described her hometown, along with all the colorful cultures that made up its working-class ranks.

“It was kind of laidback back then. We all got along good. If I was discriminated against, well, I never knew it...My grandmother used to always say, you be good to people, and they will be good to you. I find that to be true even to this day.”

As the mother of three and the wife of a blue-collared worker, Kinsey’s life seemingly falls a bit short of extraordinary. However, her few vicarious brushes with extraordinary people and events that have shaped the modern-day African-American experience, make it anything but.

One of the highlights came after her sister stood among a crowd of 200,000, all of whom had gathered for a political rally decrying racial inequality in America during the 1963 March on Washington. “I wasn’t as adventurous as her,” Kinsey admits. “But she did say, ‘It was something to behold.’” Another pinnacle regularly arrived each Sunday in the 1970s, when Kinsey would attend the local New Hope Baptist Churches’ services. There she would soak in the vocal powerhouse that was a young Whitney Houston.

“She sang in the youth choir,” Kinsey said. “She had such a beautiful family.” While Kinsey’s heart remains in Newark, like many African Americans, her roots lie somewhere in the Deep South.

Between fishing trips and Sunday dinners over baked chicken, collared green and coconut cake, her grandfather, a former slave from Athens, Ga., would share the occasional morsel of detail about his fettered past.

Even if his version of life as an enslaved house servant paled in comparison to the many horror stories recounted by field hands, it’s still a stark reminder of a dark narrative in American history. “I didn’t know too much about that,” Kinsey said of her grandfather’s enslavement. “I knew he was a good and a loving man.”

“When he was freed, he (eventually) came north,” she added. “My grandfather married my grandmother down there and she had people up here. You go where there’s family...I have cousins by the dozens, I always say.”

Despite its sordid past and many missteps on the path to equality, America continues to be a source of pride for Kinsey even in the twilight of her years. “This is my country, and I love it,” she said.

For more information on Roosevelt Care Center at Edison, a long-term care facility owned by Middlesex County and operated by the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, log onto www.rooseveltcarecenter.com or call 732-321-6800.

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