

The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove podcast
[Episode 3](#) transcript 10/18/2021

Leona Cooper Baker:

Well, let me tell you what my thoughts are. My neighborhood is a neighborhood, but deep down within my soul my neighborhood isn't the same neighborhood that I grew up in. Now, that's when we did the porches and talk under the coconut tree while my mother told stories to some of her friends who came from the Bahamas with her.

Rebecca Peterson:

That's Leona Cooper Baker, and she's talking about Coconut Grove of her youth. That Coconut Grove is not a geographic place. Her neighborhood is a village of people once united by geography and physical proximity. But these days the people in her village have spread out.

I'm Rebecca Peterson, Community Programs Manager at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens in Miami, Florida. And one of the people on a team at the museum that's been working with Black matriarchs and Coconut Grove, a small community just up the road from the museum. Together Vizcaya and these matriarchs created the Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove to share stories about Black experience in the Grove that showcased how heritage is powerful and empowers us.

Rebecca Peterson:

I asked Leona, who we just heard and Carol, another of the matriarchs what we should call this neighborhood Leona refers to. West Grove? as we'd heard from other partners in other cultural organizations who are mostly White, though we've heard it called West Grove by a few Black people too. Should we call it Coconut Grove, even though technically Leona lives in Coral Gables? Black Coconut Grove, which is a term the matriarchs offered up early in our partnership? Here's what they had to say.

Leona Cooper Baker:

I'd say that depends on who you ask.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I personally would prefer Black Coconut Grove. What do you prefer?

Leona Cooper Baker:

Some people thought it was okay to call it West Grove. I'm almost 85, I've always called it just Coconut Grove. Saying West Grove and all that, that came from people who I thought were racist.

But as far as I say, when I say I just tell you Coconut Grove, because during my time that's what we called it. And we called up there where the White people live, I'll say it a hundred times, we called that The Village or White Town.

They started that about West Grove and all of that stuff, but-



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Carol Davis Henley Bird:

To tell you the truth: people who lived here a long time ago, if they came back and you say West Grove, they wouldn't know what you were talking about.

Leona Cooper Baker:

Exactly. That's true. You know what? When you get to be my age, some of it you'll always have to explain. I say Coconut Grove, I still say that because I relate to it.

Rebecca Peterson:

And so Coconut Grove is talking about the neighborhood, not about the geography and the neighborhood is really about the community of people?

Leona Cooper Baker:

By golly Toyota, you got it.

Rebecca Peterson:

Never have I felt more proud than at that very moment.

Leona Cooper Baker:

It's always been... It's an uphill battle, honey. And we just do the best we can and yada yada ya.

Rebecca Peterson:

All of these names are used to identify the geographic designation for the community this podcast focuses on. When we say Coconut Grove, we're talking about the community of people, though as Leona noted at the beginning of this episode so much of the community's origins are anchored in place. And so much of the community is lost because of displacement of longtime residents or gentrification. Here's Carol again, talking about how the community has changed.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

In terms for us, well, obviously Charles Avenue has changed, but I grew up on Hibiscus Street, although I spent every day here on Charles Avenue. A large part that I grew up on Hibiscus is still close to being the same. But the thing is people, those who are working are all so fast paced now that when they come from work they're not necessarily sitting and talking to each other.

So what ends up being my neighborhood here is basically all over Coconut Grove, where there are pockets of people. The connection is through organizations like the Alumni Association, the Lola B. Walker, our class groups, and stuff like that. And through them and organizations that's how we can still keep some sense of community. Because really I don't have neighbors on either side of me; and there's someone directly across from me. She's friendly, but basically that's it, that's right there. Not like you'd used to talking where

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everybody used to sit on everybody's porches. When you went or came home from school, everybody saw you go down the street and watched you and made sure you didn't do anything wrong. Those days are gone.

Rebecca Peterson:

This is a common refrain. "Those days are gone." Each of the women we've interviewed for this podcast lamented the loss of the Grove community. For all of the accomplishments this community has achieved over the course of a century, the community is falling away and these women are hell bent on preserving every piece they can.

Here's Clarice Cooper, Leona's niece and self-proclaimed Grove-ite. She's technically retired from a successful career in newspaper advertising, but she spends all of her time working on the preservation of the Grove as an activist and President of the Coconut Grove Village West Homeowner and Tenants Association.

Clarice Cooper:

As we lose people through attrition, death, relocation and however, even displacement, we lose more and more of our history in that context. And that's what I'm concerned about.

Say if I had decided to move out of this area and get a home somewhere else and the Grove was just a place I wasn't coming to very much anymore, but I still own property here. And then to keep up with that property with the taxes or if you were renting or renting it out to some tenants or whatever, that gets to be overwhelming. And then you get a nice offer and then you sell out and then you lost it and then who gets it is some person who's going to develop and demolish what you had. Then put up a very expensive structure that's going to price people like us rank and file people out.

And that's when we change the whole demographics of the neighborhood and also the architectural vernacular neighborhood. These homes have a zero-lot line and really not in touch with what we even had in Miami for years and years. And those homes are super expensive.

I'm just worried about with that loss of the architectural flair, that we're losing the historical side of it as well. Because what we work for to keep up for so many years, that'll either be gone even physically and it won't matter anymore.

Rebecca Peterson:

A lot of this change and loss distills to racism. The Grove was a primarily Black community and that's changed over the years as developers move in and prices escalate, forcing legacy residents out. What happens, as Carol alluded to, is new people move in and they don't always make an effort to know their neighbors or their neighborhood story.

We as a society are moving so quickly these days. We don't really take the time to stop and talk with others who aren't already a part of our circle. But it's only the newcomers. The matriarchs have been clear in every interview that the hesitation or even disinterest in getting to know each other is held by everyone, newcomers and old-timers alike.

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The old-timers or legacy residents aren't particularly interested in getting to know the newcomers who are usually White, because the newcomers are forcing the legacy residents out; forcing the change to the community. These matriarchs think the separatism comes from what parents teach their children; what society teaches everyone. Here's Enid Pinkney, speaking with Karen, who joined us in episode one, about race relations; how messy they are and how they might be fixed.

Enid Pinkney:

No, that's a good question. What is the solution? The solution I think is for people to be fair and to give everybody their just due and to try to get rid of their prejudices. Now, how you going to do that? Because it's almost like transmitted, inherited. And even though things have changed and things have improved, you still have vestiges.

It's like vestiges on all sides. You have Black people who still feel intimidation from White people, especially as they're moving up the ladder, because they don't want to be offensive and lose their status. So, they can be stronger and getting things done, but they don't want to be offensive. And then on the other hand, you have White people who still have stereotypes about Black people.

As long as we have these problems, we don't have a solution; and we just have to work on it and try to educate people one day at a time.

Karen Urbec:

One day at a time. One person at a time.

Enid Pinkney:

Yeah, one person at a time.

Rebecca Peterson:

This idea of educating one person at a time, this isn't necessarily directed to the school system, though hope for change is definitely focused on youths. Here's Clarice again.

Clarice Cooper:

I don't find that in young people now, because don't have any children myself impart that too. But even dealing with other people who have kids, it seems to be that lack of interest. They're saying, "Oh well, everything's changing anyway so why should we care?" Well, you should care. People work hard to keep this community afloat for so many years then to get what we have today.

Rebecca Peterson:

And here's Carol.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

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From the other side of it, it's important for whether you are White, Black, whatever, for you to be able to be informed and be able to respect the contributions of another group. And I think if all of us could respect what everybody has done, I think we'd be living in a different world right now. And maybe a tribute to getting rid of some of the prejudices that people have been taught just by growing up. Not necessarily that they observe, but have been taught.

And sometimes when you challenge that belief system, then people start thinking for themselves, "well, is that really the reality?"

Rebecca Peterson:

We heard this a lot when conducting these interviews. History is lost when people leave the neighborhood, and the newcomers don't know the neighborhood history because it's not shared or it's being told by others and it's being told wrong. And it's important that the history gets shared, because heritage is powerful and empowering.

What started out as a mission to share their history with other Blacks and Coconut Grove has changed, through the course of these conversations into a much, much bigger mission to get us all, everyone, to lay down our arms, our prejudices; to learn out and respect the contributions of other groups and the many heritages in our communities. And there's progress.

Several matriarchs reflected on the progress they see. Leona sees progress when she thinks about the riot at The U.S. Capital in January of 2021.

Leona Cooper Baker:

I hadn't thought about it, I was just thinking about the grown people who did that. What I failed to think about was a lot of those kids were very embarrassed about what their parents did. And when they went into one of those schools and interviewed one of those kids, that must have been terrible for them to know, because they are probably of another mindset, and they aren't thinking about all of this stuff their parents were.

And when you think about that, that means that changes are coming, because this is another generation we're talking about. And I told Shirley, I said, "Shirley, you know what, a lot those kids they were in high school; they were embarrassed." And they said, "Some of them didn't really want their parents to go."

They were that boy and they didn't want their parents to do that. A lot of them did not, not all, some of them didn't care. But when you think about that, that's a breakthrough. And that means that changes are taking place.

Hadn't thought of that until I saw that boy on television. I said, "Oh my God, this boy is ashamed of what his dad did." So, that means that might have been in the minds of many others; so those kinds of little things mean that there's a breakthrough. So I'm saying that changes are coming, they're taking place. Had you thought about that, Rebecca?

Rebecca Peterson:

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I hadn't. And I told Leona that I hadn't. For her, that a child could feel and think differently than their parent is evidence of change. I followed this up with the matriarchs and Carol had this to say.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

Yes. And you'll find that there was one college student that turned in their parents. They saw their parents on there and they called and turned them in. Because see, people are taught from a small child, they're basically taught racism. And so things like this helps challenge and early enough for them to see for themselves, to come up with their own conclusions and reactions to things. And that's very important if we're going to ever get past all of this.

Rebecca Peterson:

Here's Thelma Gibson, she's almost 100 and takes a long-range view on progress, seeing it as an arc.

Thelma Anderson Gibson (14:23):

I have to say though, that I am so proud of young people and what they're doing today in trying to help bring back, make change. We thought everything was going to be okay. When the schools were integrated, we began to get a little bit of respect and how things opened up for Coloreds.

And then we got to be African Americans in the 1970s and then we got to be Blacks in 1980s and young people have done so much. And after the death of Floyd... The Floyd death caused so much to happen when for the first time in my long life here I was able to see Blacks and Whites and Hispanic all marching together, trying to say, "Let's make change take place. And let's make this a better place."

Rebecca Peterson:

The aftermath of George Floyd's murder in May of 2020 brought about something good in Thelma's eyes. It brought different kinds of people together fighting for better. And that's where it's at for Carol too.

Carol Davis Henley Bird:

And believe it or not, let's be honest, they're taught that on all sides. Black side, whatever... because based on how people have been treated they can be very bitter and they teach that to their children. So if we can just get at, like you said, these younger minds, younger generations, things are different now let's leave all the adversity in the past and just appreciate the good things that people have done on both sides or all sides, because it's not just both. On all sides from every different group.

I know I'm talking pie in the sky, right?

Rebecca Peterson:

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Go big or go home, Carol. Let's do it.

And that's it. That's where we land. Through our time together with these matriarchs we've learned and shared so much. There's a remarkable community of people in Coconut Grove whose history is being forgotten, through racism essentially. The people who live in this little tight-knit Coconut Grove community have clear ideas, now they've shared their stories.

Despite experiences of overt racism, like not hiring Blacks to work in the operating room or covert racism like changing Coconut Grove to West Grove, this community is full of strength and perseverance.

Strength that came in part from the determination of parents that their children's lives would be better than their own and strength from being bolstered up by stories shared in living rooms or on the front porch.

We won't call it West Grove or Black Coconut Grove or the Black Grove. We'll just call it Coconut Grove. This is the legacy of those who have lived, worked, and made memories in their community for more than a century. And it comes down to this, knowing your history, it shores you up to face whatever's coming your way. Heritage helps you know that you're not alone; that there were folks before you who overcame obstacles too. Here's Leona, she's going to close us out.

Leona Cooper Baker:

And they would all be sitting on the porch. And that's where they were talking about all their troubles too. But I figured that, well, maybe in years to come those stories would be of some importance to other folks. But whatever I'm sharing now with everybody is theirs to share forever.

Rebecca Peterson:

Thanks for joining us. We hope you're inspired to learn more about the heritage of your community, whether you're a newcomer or a legacy resident. We, Vizcaya and the matriarchs, encourage you to go chat with a neighbor; learn about them, tell them about you. If you're feeling up to it, go chat with someone who's different from yourself; listen to their accomplishments and share your own. Celebrate those accomplishments together and then go out and tell someone else what you learned.

If you'd like to learn more about Coconut Grove, visit [Dade Heritage Trust](#). It's an organization whose sole purpose is to preserve the heritage of the Miami Dade Community in which Coconut Grove is situated. It's also the organization Enid Pinkney, one of the matriarchs was president of in 1998.

For more from the matriarchs and to explore the history of Coconut Grove visit the beyond Vizcaya page on Vizcaya website at vizcaya.org/beyondvizcaya. There you can hear quick one-to-three-minute stories from the matriarchs as well as snip bits from the February 2020 in-person program that got this whole podcast started. There's also a conversation with the Executive Director of the Black Archives.

The Rich and Forgotten History of Black Coconut Grove was created by-

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Carol Davis Henley Bird:

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I'm your host, Rebecca Peterson and production was generously funded by Cathy L. Jones.