

For a seat in the house

Marbella, Jean

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT

With Catholic, Protestant and Jewish congregations supporting the demonstrators, and with civic leaders tiring of the turmoil, the theater's management dropped trespassing and disorderly-conduct charges and agreed to open its doors to all. A school's support The memories came back last week when she viewed an exhibit, curated by University of Maryland law professor Larry Gibson, on Morgan State's role in the civil rights movement.

FULL TEXT

Movie tickets at the Northwood Theatre cost just 90 cents back in 1963. But for some, the price of admission was considerably higher.

It took years of picketing and nights in jail for hundreds of African-American college students and their supporters before the theater in the Hillen neighborhood of Baltimore dropped its whites-only policy. Fifty years ago this week, the matinee of the Disney movie "In Search of the Castaways" played to the Northwood's first-ever integrated audience.

"It was just something in my opinion that needed to be done," said Joyce I. Dennison, 71, who, as a student at Morgan State College, joined the protests that led to the theater's desegregation on Feb. 22, 1963.

"You say you want to open a facility to the public -- we are part of the public."

Half a century later, the integration of a small neighborhood movie house that closed in 1981 might seem a minor footnote in the sweep of civil rights history. It was not *Brown v. Board of Education* or the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet, for those who pounded the pavement, staged sit-ins or languished in jail for the simple, day-to-day access to movie theaters or lunch counters, the Northwood victory remains a sweet one.

"It took a lot longer than perhaps we would have wished," said the Rev. Douglas Sands, 78, who first began protesting at the Northwood in the 1950s as a Morgan student. "But because of that, it did a lot for a generation of us. We got to know each other, and there was a lot of community-building.

"We had people from Loyola, from Johns Hopkins, Goucher," said Sands, who leads the White Rock Methodist Church in Sykesville. "It was a training ground for so many comrades in the struggle."

Origins of a protest

Dennison, who went on to become a schoolteacher and staff sergeant in the Army, was among the final wave of protesters who brought the long-running Northwood fight to an end. After years of smaller demonstrations that failed to get the theater to relent, organizers decided that only a larger show of resistance would bring about change. By early 1963, activists in Baltimore had won access to the Read's Drug Store fountains and to Ford's Theatre downtown, where African-Americans had had to climb a back staircase to sit in a segregated balcony. But the Northwood's management stubbornly refused to budge, even as other businesses in the shopping center dropped their resistance.

Day after day, for about a week, hundreds of picketers marched on the theater. Police started to run out of vehicles to transport those arrested, and the city's jails overflowed.

With Catholic, Protestant and Jewish congregations supporting the demonstrators, and with civic leaders tiring of the

turmoil, the theater's management dropped trespassing and disorderly-conduct charges and agreed to open its doors to all.

A picture widely circulated at the time shows Dennison and a Goucher student sitting in jail, studiously reading textbooks as they bided their time for their civil disobedience. Dennison thinks the books came from Morgan's strict dean of women, who visited throughout what turned out to be a three-night stint in jail.

"She did not accept being in prison as an excuse for not studying," Dennison said wryly.

Coming from Kennett Square, Pa., with its long history of Quaker activism, Dennison said she was naturally drawn to the protests. But as the first member of her family to go to college, she didn't let on to her parents how she was spending her free time.

"I think our parents were very supportive, but also fearful," Dennison said. "A lot of us had grandparents who were, 'Just be patient. Things will change in time.' Or, 'There's no chance of you winning this argument.'"

"My generation was a little more rebellious," she said.

A school's support

The memories came back last week when she viewed an exhibit, curated by University of Maryland law professor Larry Gibson, on Morgan State's role in the civil rights movement.

In 1963, Gibson said, the college was in something of an awkward position: generally supportive of the demonstrators, but wary of the cost of raising too much of a ruckus.

"The college was constantly being threatened with reductions of funds," said Gibson, a Howard University alumnus who, at 70, is a contemporary of the former Northwood protesters.

"The president at one point called an assembly to tell the students, 'I have been told to tell you all to stop,' but everyone knew he didn't mean it."

Indeed, faculty members at Morgan and other colleges openly supported the students. Two history professors at Morgan, Sherman Merrill and the late Augie Meier, the adviser to the school's segregation-fighting Civic Interest Group, are remembered in particular by the activists.

Merrill, now 83, was a graduate student at Hopkins in the 1950s when he watched from the Hecht's rooftop restaurant as picketers demonstrated outside the theater.

"I wanted to integrate that picket line," he said, "because if it was all black people, the white people didn't give a damn."

Now living in Vermont, Merrill is actually biracial -- his mother, who died in childbirth, was a light-skinned black woman -- but he "passes" as white.

Merrill said he always had black friends and was incensed when they would be denied entry to places where he was welcomed.

Joining the picket line, he did indeed draw attention -- from police officers, who arrested him and roughed him up, Merrill said.

He remembers the protests in personal terms.

"I find it difficult to talk about because to me, I wasn't fighting for any cause. I was fighting my cause: I can go any damned place with my black friends," he said. "I'm not a hero, but I'd do it all over again, even with some bullneck beating me up."

The integration of the Northwood Theatre came during a particularly active year for civil rights. On one day that August, the merry-go-round at Gwynn Oak Park allowed its first black riders just as hundreds of thousands marched on Washington to hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

'Time changes things'

Still to come, though, were the more violent battles against police brutality, the fight for fairer voting and housing laws, and the turbulence of 1968, with its assassinations and urban riots.

Sands, who had participated in the early demonstrations at Northwood when he was an undergraduate at Morgan in the 1950s, returned after serving in the Army to see that the effort was coming to fruition. Yet there was a sense of even tougher battles ahead.

"It was wonderful to see. The time for Northwood had come," said Sands, who was a student government president and an ROTC commander on campus. "You could see, though, the kind of anguish that was growing in the black community about core matters, where we would be able to buy homes, respect from police.

"We expected the line would move, to places we were not at all prepared for," he said. "The riots, the cities burning. The opposition -- they became better organized."

Sands saw the neighborhood surrounding Morgan State go from white during his school years -- "homeowners would call the police if you stepped on their lawn" -- to black.

But he said white flight and those who exploited racial fears by "block-busting" masked the broad and continuing support for civil rights.

Sands said the pace of change is gradual.

"It all becomes part of the broader picture," he said. "We'll get around to having the things we first fought for."

The Northwood shopping center has seen better days. Not only did the theater close in 1981, but many of the retail outlets have similarly come and gone. In 2007, former City Councilman Kenneth Harris was shot to death after visiting the New Haven jazz club.

But now, in something of a circle being closed, the shopping center should receive a boost. Morgan State broke ground in November for a \$72 million business school on a tract of land next to the shopping center.

The hope is that the school will lead to new cafes and businesses, drawing students and faculty as customers, rather than protesters.

That prospect draws a smile from Gibson.

"Time," he said, "changes things."

jean.marbella@baltsun.com

twitter.com/jean_marbella

Credit: The Baltimore Sun

Illustration

Photo(s); Caption: Photo: A man blocks the entrance to the Northwood Theatre In Baltimore's Hillen neighborhood, a movie house that until 1963 admitted only white patrons. Photo: Baltimore's jails swelled with civil rights activists who were arrested for trespassing and disorderly conduct at the 1963 Northwood Theatre protests. In the women's quarters shown above, 208 prisoners were held in a block that had a capacity of only 140. Photo: College students Joyce Dennison, left, and Harriett Cohen study while in jail. Photo: Civil rights protesters, many of them Baltimore-area students, celebrate their release from jail on Feb. 22, 1963, when the Northwood Theatre was desegregated. Photo: The front of the former Northwood Theatre in the Northwood Shopping Center near Morgan State University is now a Domino's pizza store. The theater closed in 1981. Photo: Joyce Dennison visits Morgan State, where an exhibit honoring the role that she and other students played in the civil rights movement is displayed at the school's student center.

DETAILS

Subject:	Civil rights; Theater; Prisons; Civil disobedience
Location:	Baltimore Maryland
Publication title:	The Baltimore Sun; Baltimore, Md.
First page:	A.1

Publication year:	2013
Publication date:	Feb 17, 2013
Section:	LOCAL
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Baltimore, Md.
Country of publication:	United States, Baltimore, Md.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	19439504
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	1288360138
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/seat-house/docview/1288360138/se-2?accountid=34685
Copyright:	(Copyright 2013 @ The Baltimore Sun Company)
Last updated:	2017-11-19
Database:	Baltimore Sun

Database copyright © 2023 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)