

The Guardians: Reshaping History Project and Exhibition

Interview with Antoinette Mugar, 2021

Antoinette M. Mugar ([00:00](#)):

My name is Antoinette M. Mugar, and I am a 57 year old female. I am a long time resident of Baltimore City, predominantly in West Baltimore, the neighborhoods of Sandtown-Winchester and Harlem Park.

Whitney ([00:24](#)):

Great. Antoinette, can you describe what your role is like in your family or neighborhood or community? How do you see yourself with what you do in your neighborhood?

Antoinette M. Mugar ([00:36](#)):

Sure. Within my family I'm considered the leader mainly because of birthplace. I am the oldest of three siblings and just by being the oldest that comes with a lot of responsibility and everything. But mainly as far as my family goes, I would say I've been considered a leader because of my accomplishments in the workforce. And then after being able to obtain a job and be able to go out on my own and take care of my family, going back to school. My family knows me for accomplishing a lot as far as keeping a job, staying employed, and back to school as a working adult with three children, which was very, very challenging.

I'm also proud to say I'm the first within my immediate family and one of the only family members in immediate family to hold a college degree. I actually have three college degrees, and so that's why I've been considered a leader. Also because I've always been willing to help. Willing to help my immediate family and definitely just saw a need to take what I've learned from school and just being a survivor, into the community and try to help the community. Because what I have achieved I realize I did not achieve it on my own. I was always looking for a way to pay it forward. More importantly, I just felt some type of way about how my neighborhood looked from the time I grew up in Baltimore City in Murphy Homes, to the way it look present day.

Whitney ([02:30](#)):

You can talk more about that if you want to now, what the changes are that have occurred in the past and what you want to see change. You can also talk about a specific project.

Antoinette M. Mugar ([02:43](#)):

Okay. The way I remember Baltimore City, even growing up in Murphy Homes, I mean, obviously it was challenging. Everything that was wrong about the community, you could say was going on in Murphy Homes. You saw people selling drugs in the high-rise buildings, but there was a sense of community that's weird to say, but everybody looked out for everybody. You could still go outside and play. There were playgrounds located in front of each high-rise building. There was a neighborhood recreation center, which offered free summer camp with free meals. I'm not ashamed to say that my mother was a single mother. She was divorced and it was just me and my middle sister at that time. It was a lot of single women in the projects in Murphy Homes, without fathers raising their children.

That's what was primarily public housing Murphy Homes. That's what you saw. Very rarely did you see a man living in Murphy Homes with his family. There were some families who lived in the low rises, which surrounded the four buildings of Murphy Homes. We actually grew up in 851 George Street,

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which was part of the four towers you can say. And then we also grew up in 900 [Argo 00:04:17] Avenue. With that being said, I come from very, very humble beginnings. The sense of community, like I said, it still provided a sense of hope and it provided a sense of wholesomeness. In other words, we got to go to school, during the school months we had wonderful teachers.

One teacher in particular, I will never, ever forget Ms. Turner. She was my second grade teacher. She was African American. Because there were a couple of us girls in her class who were good students, she invited each one of us on three separate occasions to go to her home. I didn't know where Ms. Turner lived, but I will never ever forget the visit to her home. The weekend that I went to Ms. Turner's house, I was so excited and it was probably in the suburbs of Baltimore County somewhere. I remember arriving to her house and she had a detached house and she had grass and she had trees and she had a fence and I can remember her daughter, Tara and her son. I don't remember his name, but I remember Tara's name because I always said, "Oh, I wish I could be Tara." Tara had a beautiful bedroom with a canopy bed, a matching bed spread, with matching curtains.

I remember Ms. Turner's husband coming home from work that Friday evening, and he had on a suit and a briefcase. I was not accustomed to seeing that. And so I was like taken back because I'm like, she's black, she's married and she's got a house and her house is clean. Not to say our house wasn't clean, but this was a different lifestyle that I didn't think that black people were accustomed to, or I was not used to seeing it. She gave me a sense of hope that maybe one day I can live like this, but the question was, how do I get there? How do I get to that point? How do I get to live the black American dream, the way Ms. Turner and her husband was living?

Whitney (06:36):

That's powerful story.

Antoinette M. Mugar (06:37):

[inaudible 00:06:37]

Whitney (06:40):

That is a thing that I feel like many young people still don't have in the city, is like role models-

Antoinette M. Mugar (06:48):

Yes.

Whitney (06:48):

To look up to. Especially ones that look like them. When you think back about all the work you've been doing in your neighborhood in Harlem Park, what are some projects you're most proud of?

Antoinette M. Mugar (07:02):

I am most proud of the fact that we were able to form Harlem Park West Community Association. I decided to... Because I was back and forth a couple of times, and I had moved for a short while to Baltimore County near Oak Court road. But because I had a family member that needed me to help

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them out. I had a great niece that was in the foster care system and I decided to take it up on myself to try to see if I could get her out of foster care. And so with that being said, by me being the working person that I was, as a registered nurse working 12 hour shifts and still working on my second degree, I'm like, I'm going to need help. Where are you going to get this help? Okay. All right. Plus, where am I going to be able to afford a three to four bedroom house in Baltimore County by myself?

I came back to Harlem Park, which was walking distance from my mom's house, Sandtown-Winchester, and I found a nice, beautiful redesigned row home on 820 North Fulton Avenue. I stayed there for 10 years. But in staying there, I couldn't believe I was paying the amount of money that I was paying for rent. The trash pickup was awful. They didn't pick up recyclables. I was living in between two vacant properties that were not maintained at all. I remember seeing the bricks on one windy day, it was so windy that the bricks literally fell from this building. The bricks fell onto the pavement and then they spilled over into the street. It took us, I don't know how many calls, 3-1-1 calls to get the city to come out and fix this. Long story short, I even had to get my mother to call because I'm a OR nurse, I'm working in OR.

I remember saying to myself, and when I look at my paycheck and I look at how much money was coming out in taxes, city taxes, and I'm saying to myself, [inaudible 00:09:15], you know what? Is my return on investment. What am I getting by living in this city? I mean, McKenzie, when I got her out of foster care and became her legal guardian, she was five years old. I enrolled her in Harlem Park Elementary School. I remember distinctly walking into the school and it was dismal. It was dark. I'm like, where's the colors, where's the light? She got beat up twice and I'm like, okay. I'm looking at the school system. I'm looking at the blight. I'm looking at the trash. I'm like, what is good about this neighborhood? How can I change this neighborhood?

There was a lot of things wrong that prevented the neighborhood from being healthy, from being vibrant. I just wanted to see, how could I join with other people? The brick spilling over into the street and almost hitting my car, that was the last straw. And when one of the business owners, Ms. Lela Campbell, Dr. Lela Campbell now, was canvassing the neighborhood with another community activist and they asked if we wanted to form a community association, I just jumped at the chance. I'm like, okay, let's see what we can accomplish together to try to change this neighborhood.

Whitney ([10:41](#)):

What did you accomplish so far?

Antoinette M. Mugar ([10:43](#)):

What did we accomplish so far? Oh my goodness. We became an official community association. We were now on the list with the city to receive emails about different buildings that might be collapsing, any zoning issues. We started receiving emails about grant opportunities to create green space. We just started being visible because we were literally invisible. The big takeaway from that is that I learned Baltimore City is very community driven. If you do not have a community association, you're like invisible. You wonder, how can that be because we don't have a community association when I'm in all these taxes?

Some of the highlights are we were able to form some wonderful relationships and partnerships. We formed relationships with the build organization, Baltimoreans United In Leadership

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Development, which took our advocacy and activism to a whole other level. They trained us to be leaders, how to be community organizers, the dos and the don'ts of community organizing. They taught us how to canvas the neighborhood. They taught us how to ask question of our neighbors and make people feel included. Out of that we were able to build a relationship with The Mission Continues, which is a veteran led organization. That was another relationship that helped us to establish.

We were able to get community signs, Harlem Park, West Community signs. We were able to paint the buildings in the 700 block of Fulton Avenue. Two blocks, well, I should say one block, but each on each side, just totally run down, blighted, abandoned. From doing this work I've come to learn that vacant and abandonment means two different things. Well, most of these properties have been abandoned. And so, because we still had two schools in our community Roots and Branches was the community school. We were really concerned about the health and wellness of our young people. What are our children seeing on their way to school? How can seeing all this trash, this blight, these abandoned houses and rats and drug paraphernalia, how does that put them in the mindset to want to learn? You can only imagine if you were a child, how would you feel going to school? Would you be going to school with a smile on the face? Not to mention a lot of these kids are walking to school by themselves.

We thought if we painted the buildings in bright, cheerful colors. Do some Orioles stuff, some Raven stuff, that, that might peak their interests, they might look at the buildings on their way to school and just feel better about themselves and just being a better mood, being the mindset to learn. That was really important for us.

Another project that we took on, we did what we call a windshield survey. A windshield survey is like when you take a particular community and look at certain criteria of what make a community, a community. We looked at the median salary. We looked at the age range. We looked at several different criteria in a community. What we found is that we had a large number of ex offenders in our community 21217. I was able to take that fact and use it as a research project. What we found out is that the recidivism rate in 21217 was astronomical. It was just unspeakably high. And so part of Harlem Parks West mission was to create a diverse, inclusive, economically sustainable community. Where we wanted to start was with housing. We wanted a developer to come into our community and up some of those row houses.

But then we had to ask ourselves with the information that we had researched, who are we going to put in those houses? If you've got a community with a lot of ex-offenders, what do you do? In talking with Gwen Brown, well, we learned about Turn-Around Tuesday, which was a ex-offender job move movement. And so the deer in the headlight look just went away and we was like, okay, so how can we get them into West Baltimore? How can we help people who fit this description or fall into this vulnerable population? How can we get them jobs? We were very successful in establishing a relationship with BUILD and Turnaround Tuesday, and that resulted in them setting up shop in Macedonia Baptist Church, right in Harlem Park.

As of 2014, they have helped over 900 people get jobs, but not all of them came from West Baltimore, to be honest. We've helped about 200 people specifically from West Baltimore obtain livable wage, which is \$12 and above an hour, benefit eligible employment. The reason why benefit eligible employment is so critical, is because most Americans have health insurance by way of their employer. Well, if you come home from prison, even if you haven't been to prison, but you've encountered the law

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in a negative way, you now have a record, you're not considered employer friendly. By helping this demographic get jobs, we not only help them get a livable wage, we help them get health insurance, which is very important. That's a lot, I know.

Whitney ([16:57](#)):

No, it is a lot, but you're amazing. My question is, I don't know how easy it is to answer it, but what motivates you to do all this work on top of your full-time job and your kids and everything?

Antoinette M. Mugar ([17:14](#)):

I know. [crosstalk 00:17:14]

Whitney ([17:14](#)):

It was like, I live in this community and I'm paying taxes-

Antoinette M. Mugar ([17:20](#)):

Yes.

Whitney ([17:22](#)):

Not only do I deserve to feel like the city's taken care of, they're part of that but that there's like more like-

Antoinette M. Mugar ([17:32](#)):

It is more. I'm so glad you asked that Whitney. Because you've asked me that question. Several other of my colleagues in the community have asked me that question. I still ask myself that question and this is how I feel. Okay. I was born in 1964, four years, I guess before Martin Luther King was assassinated. He was assassinated in '68. I was also born on the same date that Congressman John Lewis was born, I found out. I must say that it's in my blood, it's in my nature to be an activist. Quality of life, being able to have the things that can make you stay healthy and be wholesome and be happy, have not been afforded to people that look like me. Black people are still fighting the race. I mean, I don't know else how to say it.

I just feel as though, if you have been fortunate enough to acquire certain level of education or expertise in any given area, that you should definitely be paying it forward to lift up your race. That's why I do the work. I do the work because when I go to work as a nurse and I see some of my colleagues who don't look like me treating patients unfairly or not. It's not always blatant. Sometimes it's the subtleness of racism that is still perpetuated. I'm just angered and I'm frustrated. I'm constantly trying to figure out why Baltimore City looks the way it looks now, why black people are still being mistreated and why we don't have the same economic opportunities, the same opportunities toward healthcare. Why, why, why, why, why?

I'm just determined that I want to be able to help better conditions for black people, for my children, my grandchildren, my great-great-grandchildren. I definitely feel strongly that the generation prior to me, and that would be my mom's generation, I feel as though they dropped the ball,

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unintentionally they dropped the ball. Because after the civil rights movement, we achieved some level of success, to be perfectly honest. We were able to get jobs and factories. We were able to participate in unions. We were able to go to schools. The schools were now segregated. But nobody carried on the conversation about how we got there and how the fight must continue. That's what happened. Now that's why we have what we see now, is this continuance with the Black Lives Matter and everything. But for me personally, I was born to do this. This is part of my destiny. This is part of my contribution to my people.

Yeah. One of the questions you asked, you asked, "What are you most proud of in your neighborhood?" I said I am most proud of the fact that Harland Park now has a voice. I am most proud that our advocacy and activism has the attention of elected officials. We have more mayoral and city council president assemblies now where they actually come out to the community. You're seeing them walk the community more. You're seeing them participate in cleanups more. I mean, pre-Freddie Gray, it was like, what's what's going on in Baltimore City. I am most proud of the fact that I took the time to act opportunities that resulted in me becoming the leader that I am today. I am proud that Harlem Park was able to gain state funding from Core. This was state money that was allotted post Freddie Gray to Baltimore City communities to either stabilize vacant buildings or demolish them.

Harlem Park was not on the list to receive any of that money. Lela Campbell got on the phone and she called me and Joy. Joy Ross is the president. She said we've got to call around, we've got to call the governor's office. We've got to call Delegate Haynes. We got to call around. And so we were able to do that. And then from doing that, we were invited to meetings at housing, in the Benton Building, where we sat amongst our Sandtown-Winchester community partners and we were able to take a part of that. Had that not been brought to our attention, I mean, we wouldn't have gotten any of the money to get rid of some of those properties.

Whitney (22:56):

I wonder what you think of this question? What do you want others to know about your neighborhood? When people think about Baltimore and West Baltimore has made national news a lot lately.

Antoinette M. Mugar (23:12):

Yes it has.

Whitney (23:13):

And even international news.

Antoinette M. Mugar (23:14):

Yes it has.

Whitney (23:16):

You live there. What do you want people to know about you and your neighborhood in that way?

Antoinette M. Mugar (23:22):

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Well, I want them to know that for one, Harlem Park is a historical neighborhood. The first elected black Congressman, Parren J. Mitchell, has a house there. The house is still there and I've actually had the opportunity to tour that house. Me and Dr. Campbell. It was amazing. We went down into the sub-basement. I've never heard of a sub-basement. What is a sub-basement? This thing was ugly, it had cobwebs. Well, guess what? That sub-basement was a connection to the underground railroad. I was just so amazed. We were both taking pictures and the guy that showed us this, he says, "You can't tell anybody." I'm like, "Why can't we tell everybody?" This is history. I mean, also Morgan, Morgan State University, the first building was located in Harlem Park. The Harlem theater was in Harlem Park.

There's a lot of talent in that community, untapped talent. When you talk to some of the long time residents who've been there and you listen to them share the stories about how beautiful and how vibrant it was. I mean, the four squares with the churches on each corner, it's beautiful. It's breathtaking. I would just love to see that turned around. I mean, just update some of the housing. I just want them to know that the people are there, the people need additional resources, renovation projects. We want developers to come there. Harlem Park West, we have met with developers before, because that was one of our main goals, was to bring residential and commercial development to our community. When you sit down with a developer and they tell you that your community does not have an anchor institution, my first question as a nurse, because I'm just a nurse, what the hell is an anchor institution? Let's go get one if we don't have it, because if that's the only thing that's holding us back, Jesus.

Anyway, I had to do some research and learn what an anchor institution and one of the developers, TRF, Mr. Sean Closkey, wonderful man, wonderful, very pleasant, humble, helpful. He was introduced to us through Bill. He explained to us that John Hopkins is an example of an anchor institute. And I'm like, oh, okay. In learning that an anchor institution can support further development projects, residential and commercial, because it has, I don't know what the word you would call it, but it's an anchor, it provides jobs, this, that, and the other. Moving forward, and as I came to understand an anchor institution doesn't just have to be a building, because [inaudible 00:26:28] is right around the corner. That's an anchor as well. But I would just love to see more development come to see and I want to see that before I close my eyes one day.

Whitney ([26:42](#)):

Yeah.

Antoinette M. Mugar ([26:42](#)):

Definitely. I know. One other thing I'd like to add is, because I cannot go without mentioning Shirley Nathan-Pulliam. The reason why I have to mention her is because, one, she's a nurse. She's a nurse and I look up to her for so many reasons. But when she inherited part of the seventh district, the 44A, Harlem Park and parts of Sandtown became hers, because she also had parts of the county. And so when they did the restructuring of her district and she inherited Harlem Park and Sandtown, and her team drove around in community. She said she was quite disturbed by what she saw. She can describe it better than I can. But she said when she saw what she saw, she had to figure out a way how she could change it.

She started having these series of meetings, and out of that work we formed the Social Determinants of Health task force, which became law. Can't remember the exact date, shame on me,

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because I did participate in the testimony in Annapolis twice. The first year I testified, not just me, myself, because there's a team of us and there's like five pillars. There's housing, transportation, workforce development, mental health and then the social justice. I chaired the social justice arm of the task force. The first year some of us testified to have this task force put into motion so we could get state funding to help change the dynamics around resources. It was denied. It didn't win. It didn't pass the House chambers. It didn't pass the Senate chambers.

But Senator Pulliam through her tenacity and hard work, and the team's hard work, we decided to push forward. We were not going to let anything stop us because we knew that there was so much systemic racism and inequities that had happened in that community, we had to do something. The following year we got more expert testimony, we tightened up our research and everything, and it passed. Passed the House, passed the Senate. We are in a seven year pilot in partnership with the University of Maryland. Yes. I'm proud of that work.

Whitney ([29:23](#)):

Yeah. Congratulations.

Antoinette M. Mugar ([29:24](#)):

I'm so proud of that work. Yes.

Whitney ([29:26](#)):

That's a big deal and your role continues to be sharing that arm of it?

Antoinette M. Mugar ([29:31](#)):

Yeah. Social justice. Yes. That part of the social justice, we had to come up with smart goals because Senator Shirley Nathan-Pulliam, she's on top of it. It's just not, no, just the task force that's just set up in name only, each committee chair, your group has to come up with smart goals, with objectives that we have to meet. We have to turn in a yearly report every year to the governor. My goals last year were to increase voter registration. Well, not my goals, the social justice arm of it. We had to increase voter registration and voter turnout. I'm proud to say since 2016, we have registered a little more than 500 voters. Some households there were generations, three generations of people who had never voted before. That work continues because there are a lot of ex offenders, like I said in that community, who still do not understand that they now have the right to vote.

It takes a lot of talking, Whitney. It's a lot of talking. Your mouth becomes dry because there's so much apathy and lack of hope. And so you say, how do you get people to believe in the system? How do you make them realize that their vote is going to make a difference? Because people want to see immediate change. It takes a lot of talking to tell them, "Okay, yes, we're going to have change. It might not be immediate. Yes. Your vote is one of many that will count."