

## *The Guardians: Reshaping History Project and Exhibition*

### Interview with Cherring Spence, 2021, Part 1

Cherring Spence ([00:00](#)):

My name is Cherring Spence. It is unusual name. It is spelled C-H-E-R-R-I-N-G. Most people call me Sharon. So I answer to anything close. I'm president of Park Lane Neighborhood Association. We are here in Central Park Heights. I've been here in Park Heights, serving as the president for six years now.

Interviewer ([00:32](#)):

And how long have you lived in Park Heights?

Cherring Spence ([00:36](#)):

I have lived in Park Heights off and on for more than 20 years. I've lived in Baltimore for almost 50 years.

Interviewer ([00:49](#)):

And what's your role as president, or what are words that you would use to describe what you do as president of a community association, or otherwise?

Cherring Spence ([01:00](#)):

Basically we stand in as the voice for Park Lane; interceding for them in terms of resources, trash, we have meetings with the community. Virtually we act as a voice for park lane. We act as advocates on behalf of the residents. Not all residents are able to attend meetings. Not all residents are able to assist with school, with the rec center, those kinds of things. So we step in those instances. We meet with organizations such as Park Heights Renaissance. At one time, I was on the board of Neighborhoods United. Neighborhoods United was the umbrella for most of the neighborhood associations that exist in Park Heights. So I did that for several years.

Interviewer ([02:06](#)):

Great. And what are you most proud of? What are some projects that you've been able to make happen in the neighborhood?

Cherring Spence ([02:14](#)):

Ooh, what am I most proud of? I am most proud of the job that we as seniors have done. I'm a senior. Most of the people that are in the neighborhood association are seniors. Most of them, not all, but most of them are. And we have worked hard to start a community garden. We started rec council at James D. Gross recreation center. We've had a beautification project. We were able to put in a new sign. We were able to leverage funds, \$700,000, for James D. Gross to do some badly needed work there. And when I say leveraged, Senator Antonio Hayes, Tony Bridges, Councilwoman Middleton, all helped us to be able to leverage those funds for the rec. Also, we were able to expand our borders. We used to border Greenspring Avenue to the east, Coldspring Lane to the south, Pimlico Road to the west, and Roslyn Avenue to the north. But now our borders extend as far as Reisterstown Road to the west, and to

Woodland Avenue up to Pimlico to the north. So we are very proud of the work that we have been able to do here in the community. And we're looking to do even more.

Interviewer ([04:06](#)):

And why do you do this work?

Cherring Spence ([04:10](#)):

You got to do it because you love it. You got to do it because you're concerned about the community that we live in. Because otherwise it can be very stressful. And it is stressful work, because you get complaints about trash, you get complaints about illegal parking, you get complaints about hot water bills, you get complaints about everything. Some of it we can help with, some of it we refer to other agencies. We work with DPW, Transportation, we work with the liaisons for the city. And then we also work with the mayor's liaison. We work with the liaison for our council person, who is Councilwoman Sharon Green Middleton. I'm trying to remember everything.

Interviewer ([05:06](#)):

All the names? I know it's lots of city agencies. And it sounds like you're really, like you said, an advocate and a connector for people in the neighborhood, and residents that might not know where to go for things.

Cherring Spence ([05:20](#)):

Exactly, exactly. And many times when they have concerns and they don't know who to call or where to go to, they end up calling me. And I end up reaching out to the liaisons on their behalf, or I'll direct them to call 311, or we'll call PHR.

Interviewer ([05:40](#)):

And I think you hesitated, but you were going to say, there's lots more work that you want to do. What are some of those things on your mind, or that you hear from people that you want to help happen them in the neighborhood?

Cherring Spence ([06:00](#)):

One of the things that we're trying to do is increase the activities at the recreation center, and the attendance there. There is a lot of work that needs to go on. They have a fantastic director, Clifford Slater, who works really, really hard. So we want to have continued improvements that happen to the building. Also our community garden, that we were able to start a few years ago with Recreation and Parks. So COVID has slowed us down a little bit in what we were doing there. But we have Edgecombe Park, and that's where our community garden. We were able to get Recreation and Parks to allow us to come in and utilize an abandoned basketball slash tennis court, and turn it into a community garden.

And so now, of course, we're working with you because we're excited about being able to put up screens, and artwork, and add more benches, and all of that, to the park. And we want to have comedy shows, we want to have open air concerts. We want to have the people, the community, people new that have moved into the community that don't know about the park. We want them to know that we have a place that will help and benefit them, their children, a safe place for them to run, green space, and the artwork that we're hoping that will be there. And so we're looking forward to that. That's a project that we're really excited about.

Interviewer ([07:58](#)):

It's a beautiful space. I've asked this of the other Guardians. But what gives you energy and sustains you? How do you do all this work? I asked you why, but... [crosstalk 00:08:15]

Cherring Spence ([07:58](#)):

God.

Interviewer ([07:58](#)):

Say it again? I'm sorry.

Cherring Spence ([08:15](#)):

God. And he is the only one that helps and strengthens me. I have a lot of health issues, I am a senior, I am disabled. And so I have to look fully to him for strength, along with the other members of the association. They push me along, they really do push me along. And one of the other things that keeps me going is the need. There so many needs here in Park Lane, and in Park Heights development. I worked years ago in the community, up to 2004, was working with the community advocating as well, for redevelopment here. I moved out of the area for a few years after I retired, and because of my disability. But there was a tugging to come back to Park Heights once I recovered, got back on my feet. And I just had the desire to come back to work here in the community again.

My daughter thought I had lost my mind. It's like, "Why would you go back? You have everything you need and you want, right here. Why in the world would you go back to Park Heights, of all places? But I felt the need was here. I had friends that lived here in Baltimore, that was one draw. I hadn't been around them for a while. But there was just a draw to come back to Park Heights. So I returned to the house that I lived in before I left, same place, same area. And I was hurt, I was really crushed because all of the hopes and dreams about the development, none of it had taken place, nothing. As a matter of fact, things had gotten worse. I saw more abandoned houses, I saw more vacant lots, I saw more poverty, I saw more people hurting, more crime, everything. I couldn't believe it when I came back here. So since I've been back, I've been trying to work diligently to do what I can do. I can't do everything, but everybody has a part to play. And so I'm just trying to do my part.

Interviewer ([11:06](#)):

Amazing. Yeah, go on.

Cherring Spence ([11:08](#)):

And the biggest thing was realizing that I couldn't do a lot of the things that I used to do. We used to get out and walk through the community, we used to get out with the flyers, we used to get out and do all kinds of things. Even years ago I would get out because I used to be on a scooter, that's why the ramp is there. So we had a lot of kids that grew right up on this street, that grew right up in this community, that would get out and help me. And we would all get out, and walk around to pass out flyers and all in the community. And I realized when I came back, even though I was no longer on the scooter... But I realized because of several surgeries and all that I had, that I couldn't get out like I used to and go through the community. But still, I was determined to do what I could do. Not to mention, I'd gotten a lot older. But I was still determined to do what I could do, and help where I could help.

Interviewer ([12:18](#)):

Yeah.

So what would you say to younger people in Baltimore, or outside of Baltimore that want to get involved in the community, or community organizing? What would your advice be to them? What have you learned that you would tell them?

Cherring Spence ([12:35](#)):

One of the words that you just said, involved. Get involved, get engaged, your community. You have the ability to do a lot of things that we as older adults aren't able to do anymore. You have a voice, your voice matters. The strength that you have, the education that you have. Sometimes people think it takes a whole lot of money, it really doesn't. It does take a willingness to help. It takes a desire to help. It takes a willingness to bring about change. And I find that that's what's really missing, that closeness in the community. It amazes me now because we knew just about everybody that lived around us, among us. And now people move in and out, and they don't want to be bothered. They don't want to be connected.

Interviewer ([13:43](#)):

So get involved, get connected?

Cherring Spence ([13:46](#)):

Yes.

Interviewer ([13:46](#)):

You don't have to have a lot of money, but you have more power by being connected?

Cherring Spence ([13:51](#)):

Right, right.

And a lot of times now, people want to know, "Well, what's in it for me?" And they don't understand that what happens in the community in which you live, the city in which you live, impacts you. It impacts you. And so, a lot of the changes that we see, a lot of things that we see happening, a lot of the crime that we see happening, a lot of the drug activity; eventually it impacts you. So you can help to turn it around, young people I believe can help to change it.

I'm a product of the sixties. I look back, and I see how different people are now than what they are then. Because people were willing to sacrifice blood for what they believed in. They were willing to give up their seats on the bus. They were even willing, if they had to, to give up their lives. And I look at young people now, and it's like, "What Happened?" Where are our Martin Luther Kings of today? Where are you? Where are our leaders of today? And that makes me really, really sad because I'm not hearing those voices, I'm not seeing those people. I'm not seeing people willing not to buy gas so they can make it better for everybody, not just for themselves, but for everybody. And you still do have the protests. You do still have the marches. I don't want to take away from what they're doing at all, because that matters. But then on the local level, on a community level, on a grass roots level, I don't see it happening.

Interviewer ([16:05](#)):

How did you learn to do the work that you're doing? You know what I'm saying? Did someone teach you? Did it come over time? When you look at yourself as a young person, what made you get activated? Or what we would say is more radical, why would you...

Cherring Spence ([16:28](#)):

When I was growing up, my mother had a saying, "That necessity is the mother of invention." And one of her other sayings was, "You may not always have what you want, but to keep clean what you have."

Interviewer ([16:53](#)):

Hmm.

Cherring Spence ([16:54](#)):

So there were little saying that, of course, when you hear them when you're growing up, it's like, "That don't make no sense to me. I don't want to hear that. That ain't got nothing to do with me." But as you get older, you come to understand that, "You know, I have to get involved. I have to get engaged." We may not have everything that we want, to do the job that needs to be done, but do what you can do, use what you do have. Without Neighborhood Association, we don't have a whole lot of people. We could have, if people would just get involved, if people would just get engaged. But they're waiting for somebody else to do it. And we could do so much more if we had more people doing.

Interviewer ([17:54](#)):

Well, is there anything about your neighborhood, about Baltimore, about being a part of the Guardians Project, or about yourself even, that you want to share?

Cherring Spence ([18:12](#)):

I love this city. I guess, I love what the city used to be, if that makes sense to you. I love the connectivity. I love the fact that we used to could come out of our door, and people would pitch in, and help, and work together. And I miss that. I really do miss that. Now people come out and peep, and they look up down the street, and they go back. I love working with the people that I work with. I love those ladies, and men. I love them. As I said, most of us are seniors, but they still want to... We're called The Living Garden, the senior group that we have. We're called The Living Garden, because we are still fruitful. We still bring life to the community.

And we're trying to sprout out, and we're trying to grow. It's like a vine. I have ivy around here. And that ivy just keeps pushing forth, it'll connect to anything it can connect to. Sometimes I have to pull it off the wall. And there's no dirt there. There's no dirt there at all. But once that ivy starts growing, and it gets on that wall, it'll take root. And the next thing you know, it's just climbing right on up. And if you're not careful, it will cover this whole house. Even though there's no soil, even though there's no dirt, even though there's no fertilizer, it refuses to die. It just keeps pushing forth, it keeps connecting to whatever it touches.

And so we want to connect with whatever we touch, and we want to take root, and we want to grow. And if it connects with another vine, it'll wrap itself around it, and then it'll branch off into something else. And we're surrounded by Cylburn, and we're surrounded Levindale. Towanda is not far, Park Heights Terrace is not that far. But everybody is going and doing their own thing, instead of us connecting. And as I put forth with some, we are just really better together. And that's what I see that's missing. And sometimes when you try to reach out to some of them... Some others that are around,

they don't want to connect. And I think that's one of the things that's missing now. But we're trying to bring people together here in the city to find solutions to many of the concerns that we have, many of the challenges that are facing the city.