The Guardians: Reshaping History Project and Exhibition

Interview with Dorothy Cunningham, 2021

Dorothy Cunningham (00:00):
My name's Dorothy Cunningham. I live in Irvington. I've lived here for 22 years. I'm the President of the Association. I've been the president for the last 17 years. I was raised up in east Baltimore. I spent a lot of my younger years is in the eastern shore. I had five children, 18 grandchildren, sixth great grandchildren. And I'm 54 years old.

Speaker 2 (00:31):
Awesome. And where are we sitting right now?

Dorothy Cunningham (00:38):
We're now sitting in the Irvington Community Center.

Speaker 2 (00:42):
And can you tell me a little bit about your role at the Center, in the community, how the Center came about?

Dorothy Cunningham (00:49):
Well, I'm actually the acting director of the Community Center. Took about six years to attain the building, to open up a community center in the Irvington Community. In the center, we do a youth program. We also have sewing classes and computer classes. We do program for young people, it's a reading program we do on Saturday for kids from the ages three to four. The Center has been open for about two years. We have a young man that runs a youth program. He's the executive director of Iron Mentality, which is a great youth program. They provide mental health and a variety of different social skills for the young men.

Speaker 2 (01:39):
Awesome. And when and why did you decide to open this Center?

Dorothy Cunningham (01:48):
Well, I decided to open the Center, like I said, six years ago. It took long to get one, because there were not any type of resources within the Southwest District. And I felt as though we needed to provide service for the people in the district. So I fought very hard to get the Center up and running. We took one summer to prepare, to paint, to clean, to repair the back porch and the front porch. We had a group of young people from the Catholic church out Glen Burnie, and they came in and helped. And they worked very hard to get the Center open.

Speaker 2 (02:30):
Cool. And besides the Center, what other projects or things have you done in this community, or in your life that you want to share?
Dorothy Cunningham (02:42):
Well, in my life, I'm a foster mom. I've been a foster mom for 30 years. I've had probably over 25 kids, and then my last child is three now. I got him when he was a year old. So I kept him for two years, and he just went home Wednesday with his mom. It was heartbreaking. But all kids deserve to be with their parents. Within the community, we do community cleanups, community meetings. I meet with the business owners once a month to discuss code enforce issues. I have done liquor board hearings. We was able to close down a liquor store. I'm working now on having one of the bars close at 9:00 instead of 2:00 AM. So the delegates introduce the legislation, to say they would open at 9:00 and close at 9:00 PM, because they have been one of the problem businesses in the community. Also, working with, I think they're called Baltimore Development Corp. Six of the business was able to get grants to do a facade upgrade. So, that should happen this spring. I work with some of the local churches doing food pantries. We also do food giveaways here. We'll start back up in March. So we provide boxes of food for the residents in the community. It's just so much that we do to try to better the community.

Speaker 2 (04:22):
And why do you feel like you, as a person, do all that work?

Dorothy Cunningham (04:31):
Technically, I don't know why. I started when I was a teenager, in the community where I lived. On Saturdays, I would go up and down and clean the street, and scrub the front steps for the older neighbors. So I've been doing it for a very long time. It may be something just in me or maybe I picked it up from my mom, because she would volunteer a lot. So it's a compassion that I have, and I feel as though I must do it. So I don't know why it's in me, but I have to, even when I'm not feeling well, I'm still out doing things. Because when I can't sit around, I feel like I'm just, how would I say, I'm just useless because I'm not doing anything.

So I always have to be doing something even in high school, some the girls I went to school with, they may not have money, or a meal, and I would bring them home and they could eat with us. I remember the very time getting a beating for my mom, because I took off my coat and I gave it away, because the girl didn't have a coat. But I knew I had another one at home. So it's just something in me, and I don't know why, but it's just there. And I feel the need to try to make things better.

Speaker 2 (05:51):
And what do you do to kind of take care of yourself and keep that spirit alive or whatever?

Dorothy Cunningham (06:00):
You know what? I think it's just by the grace of God, because I've been experiencing a lot of health issues. But he had pulled me through. I think my service is not completed. So that's why he make sure I'm able to keep performing the community work and family work. So I think that's where I get my strength from.

Speaker 2 (06:30):
And what would you want someone to know, who wasn't from this neighborhood or not even, maybe from Baltimore, about your community?
Dorothy Cunningham (06:35):
Irvington is a great community. We do have issues that develop probably the last five years with drug dealing, but Irvington is a great community. It's diversity. We have a different stocks of home. We have, what would you call them, like the vintage houses, the older model of houses, we have those. We have a lot of amenities. We have two senior buildings. We have a nursing home. We have Mount Saint Joe's High School, which is a private all boys school.

We have a treatment center for young adults. So it's a lot of things that the community offers. We have a lot of hard working people that live here as well. I'm just not the only person that works in the community. I have a core group, my board, that is awesome, and they are willing to do anything they can to make the community better.

Speaker 2 (07:37):
And we talked about all the things you do. But how would you describe your role in your neighborhood? Whatever words come to mind?

Dorothy Cunningham (07:50):
My role is, number one, to make sure my community is safe, not only for myself or my grandkids, but for the whole entire community. That's my number one role. My number one priority is to keep the community safe as possible. My other role is to probably make sure it's clean, try to bring in different businesses to improve the business quarter, and just always be willing to work with my state delegate and the city council people, because we can't get anything done without what come with them.

Speaker 2 (08:30):
Are there other stories or things you want to share about your work, or your work at the Center.

Dorothy Cunningham (08:38):
Trying to think-

Speaker 2 (08:38):
Right.

Dorothy Cunningham (08:38):
... is there a store.

Speaker 2 (08:40):
Like a time when you're just like?

Dorothy Cunningham (08:42):
I've had some bad times dealing with drug dealers. I've been threatened, they was going to kill me. I had a police detail for probably like five months. Everywhere I went, the police went. And it really got on my nerves. But I knew they were doing their job. But I didn't stop because I don't allow people to scare me. So everything I was doing, I continued to do. So I guess they finally realized I was not going away. So the threats stopped you. I just was not going to tolerate being threatened, pretty much they're kids. And I'm not going to tolerate the. I expect respect from them, just like I give them.
And I always tell them, because I do have conversation with the drug dealers. I tell them I can't tell you what to do, but sometimes it's how you do it. You can't be up in people's stores, hanging and rolling your marijuana, and selling your drugs. Because that ruins business for them, and the good people like me, don't want to go in the store. So you find the need that you have to sell drugs, then go in the alley and sell the drugs. So I have conversations with them all the time. I'm praying one day they will go away. But young folks just think that's the only way of living, is to stand on corner and get fast money.

Speaker 2 (10:06):
Yeah.

Dorothy Cunningham (10:06):
Yeah.

Speaker 2 (10:07):
I think that's a lot of what it is, is they can make money quickly.

Dorothy Cunningham (10:11):
Quickly

Speaker 2 (10:12):
And there aren't other jobs... I don't want to put words in your mouth, but there are other jobs.

Dorothy Cunningham (10:16):
Oh, absolutely. I mean, and it seems to be the only thing they know. And sad, because most of the kids are raising their-self. Mom is probably on drugs. Dad is in prison. And they don't know nothing else, but selling drugs, because we offer them jobs, but it take too long for them to make money. So they don't want a job. So they just stand on the corner from sun up to sun down, just trying to make them money and getting caught up. Because most of them either going to go to jail or they going to get killed, and it's happening a lot like that. So we still try to have conversations with him. Even my youth program guy, he try to bring him into his program, but they just don't want it. They don't see it.

Speaker 2 (11:07):
And why do you think it has gotten worse over, you said over the last five years, but why do you think that's increased in this neighborhood, or this community, or in Baltimore, whatever?

Dorothy Cunningham (11:18):
I think because in this community, most of the young folks that's on my corners don't even live in this community. They coming out from other communities. So I don't know why it has increased, but it seems to have gotten worse. And I can't pinpoint why it's like that. But it has gotten worse. It's more young folks than ever been hanging on the corner. I don't know why.

Speaker 2 (11:51):
Okay. If you could ask for other resources to come to your neighborhood, whether that be from the state or outside of Baltimore, or within the community, what things would you like to see happen?

Dorothy Cunningham (12:06): Other resources.

Speaker 2 (12:10): Or, I don’t know. What is your vision for-

Dorothy Cunningham (12:11): My vision is we develop in the business quarter. Other, maybe not resources, but getting a system to bring in different types of business. Because most of our business is just like those everybody sell chicken box, there’s no healthy foods here whatsoever. So it would be great if we will be able to get a supermarket, if not a supermarket, stores that would sell healthy food and not all this junk food. It's really destroying all of us. It's causing diabetes, it's causing heart disease. It causes a lot. Or maybe in the Center we could get like resources to provide people with energy assistance or rental assistance, like different programs that people would need. Job training. It's so many programs that we need within this, in the Southwest district.


Dorothy Cunningham (13:16): Sorry.

Speaker 2 (13:17): It's okay. It's okay. You need to get it?

Dorothy Cunningham (13:19): No, it's my daughter I'll call her later.


Dorothy Cunningham (13:22): Because there actually just no resources in the whole entire Southwest, not just in Irvington, in Southwest. The focus seem to be never on communities like ours. Seems to be where all the money goes to like Fell's Point, Harbor East. They don't invest monies into our communities. It's sad, but it's true. And in order for us to get anything, we got to do it on our own. And we got to fight for it. And I'm always willing to put up a good fight with anybody. And I don't care who you are, I will give you a good fight. And because that's the only way we're going to get something. Because if we just go ask and they say, "No," then like, "Okay." They expect you to go away. But I'm one of those folks that never go away, until you give me what I ask for, because I think we deserve the same thing everybody else get.
Speaker 2 (14:18):
And do you-

Dorothy Cunningham (14:19):
So I’m going to fight you.

Speaker 2 (14:21):
And do you have a story of success where you pushed for something, and again, you made it happen for you?

Dorothy Cunningham (14:31):
Success was having a bar closed down where a 16 year old was in the bar drinking, and he ended up getting killed. Number one, he shouldn't even been in the bar. So we had to go to Liquor Board Hearings. I got busloads of people to go to that hearing. It may have took us like five months, but finally they took their license and they closed it down. So that was a very successful story. And the young man's mother was one of my employees when I worked at Caplin. So it really touched me, because I was close to her.

So I knew I had to do something to shut that bar down. And it happened. Took a while.

Speaker 2 (15:13):
Yeah.

Dorothy Cunningham (15:13):
But it happened. Because I was determined that it was going to close, because you don't have no business with kids in the bar. And so had not that young man been in that bar, he would still been living today. And that was probably like eight years ago that that happened. But I'm always willing to do whatever it takes to shut something down if you're not doing what you're supposed to do. Yes.

Speaker 2 (15:28):
And how did you meet Ms. Gwen? I'm just curious. You don't have to-

Dorothy Cunningham (15:33):
I met Ms. Gwen through the organization, Build.

Speaker 2 (15:43):
Yeah.

Dorothy Cunningham (15:35):
Irvington was a member of the Build Organization and Ms. Gwen became our community organizer after our first one left. So that's how I met Ms. Gwen. I love Ms. Gwen to death. She's a sweetheart. She really is.