

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

### Interview with Gwen Brown, 2021

Gwen Brown ([00:00](#)):

My name is Gwen Brown. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am a mother, wife of three, and currently I am the Community Engagement Coordinator with Behavioral Health Systems Baltimore. Before that I was an organizer in Baltimore for about 15 plus years.

Speaker 1 ([00:24](#)):

Great. Where do you live in Baltimore?

Gwen Brown ([00:26](#)):

Oh, I live in Govans.

Speaker 1 ([00:30](#)):

Have you grown up in Baltimore or?

Gwen Brown ([00:33](#)):

Yep, I'm a native of Baltimore. I grew up in East Baltimore. We didn't have names for the neighborhood then, but right now it's called the Oliver community. So I grew up in the Oliver community of East Baltimore.

Speaker 1 ([00:45](#)):

And is your family like from here, generations back or is it?

Gwen Brown ([00:50](#)):

My grandmother and grandfather migrated here from Stony Creek, Virginia. My grandmother was reared on a farm that is actually still in the family. She was born 1902 and that farm is still in the family. There were 13 of them all together. She said she used to work indoors and then her brothers would work outside. She had an eighth grade education.

She came to Baltimore with my grandfather because he wanted to get a job. He worked at Bethlehem Steel. A lot of people through the great migration that came here and worked at Bethlehem Steel in Sparrows Point. They came and they bought a home in the Oliver community and I was raised by my grandmother and grandfather. Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([01:45](#)):

Cool. I guess tell me a little bit about your work in Baltimore. What are you doing now and what kinds of projects have you helped make happen over your time as an organizer?

Gwen Brown (02:00):

Right now, again, I'm the Community Engagement Coordinator with Behavioral Health Systems Baltimore, or B.H.S.B, which actually provides oversight for behavioral health systems in Baltimore City.

It provides technical assistance and it provides services to people that have behavioral health and substance abuse disorders throughout Baltimore City.

The organization that I work for is a nonprofit. We don't have clinics or anything like that directly, but we refer people to places if they need counseling, grief counseling, anything like that. I'm the first person to hold this job. I actually began this position in February of 2020, which was funny because I'm a Community Engagement Coordinator and then I was supposed to be out in the community, but then COVID hit. I had to be really innovative on how I collaborate with community.

Right now some of the projects that I've done, I think one that I'm particularly proud of is called HUT, Healing Us Together. It is an initiative to have these healing centered conversations on community, that can be facilitated by community persons or primarily faith led institutions. It's a tool because particularly for people of color, we won't necessarily seek treatment, but we'll go to our pastors or clergy persons to talk. These are conversations now that a lot of faith led leaders, as well as two community leaders, have been taught to facilitate in communities to be able to get people to have these initial conversations around healing and trauma.

Then if they need to seek more professional services, then we have that. It's really starting to take off. There have been 18 persons trained all over Baltimore City to facilitate these conversations for the first cohort. The next cohort will begin April 15th, where we will have about 18 to 20 more persons trained to facilitate these conversations.

That's a really big initiative that I'm proud of. I'm also proud of the fact that the organization that I work with is very top down. They realized that they needed to be more in community. I've been able to bring a huge community voice to the organization. Done work there around the consent decree, the behavioral health portion of the consent decree and bring that forth more. There's a lot of initiatives that I've done there.

Prior to that, in my organizing, I've done a lot. I started with Child First Authority as a Program Coordinator there. It was then John E Howard Elementary school, now it's Dorothy I Height. We had about 150 children in the program there, it was actually set up like a Trojan horse to be able to get into the school and be able to work with administrators, parents, and teachers to organize not just within the school, but in the surrounding community.

Gwen Brown (05:29):

While I was at John E Howard, I made a connection with MICA, Maryland Institute College of Art, to see if some of the students would be willing to come to school and work with some of the young people. They did and that was part of the community organizing effort through MICA. It's not the primary reason to start it, but it had some input into how that got off the ground.

And then after that I came on board with BUILD, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development. They had an offset called the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee for low wage workers, and so I'll talk to low wage workers all over Baltimore City. Bus drivers, bus aides, janitors, crossing guards. Just to try to figure out what it was that they needed.

We went to churches or soup kitchens and found that people in the soup kitchens, they weren't necessarily there because of the reasons many people thought. They were there because they might've worked two or three low wage jobs. But if they could just have one decent living wage job, then that would help. Then we just talked to them all over, in any way we organized. We was able to get the first living wage in the country. Which was huge. That was huge.

Just met some really incredible people through that effort. Then after that, I began to work on a variety of issues through the city, but eventually I got back into schools. I was at William Mayfield

Middle School, organizing there and found out that a lot of violence was happening in community with young people.

I wanted to find out why, so I did a lot of listening sessions with young people all over the city with myself and my colleague, Laddie Snead, who moved here from North Carolina. She was an organizer formerly in DC. She went away to divinity school. When she saw what was happening, particularly to young black men in Baltimore, she felt like she needed to do something. She came here, so then I had a co-partner who was really passionate about young people as well.

Then I talked to young people all over the city. At the Woodburn Center, which is a juvenile detention center, a young man said, "look, I'm here. If you don't find something for me to do, my brother's going to be here as well". Laddie and I started "save our youth, save our city" campaign. We had about a group of 10 young people from all over the city that we worked with. We taught them organizing principles and they began to organize. Because we found out from the young people, across the board that they discuss saying, "well, we're getting in trouble because two things- there's an uptick in gang activity and we don't have anything to do".

I did a lot of work around gang prevention with the State's Attorney's office, [inaudible 00:09:37] won't work productions and Whitney Frazier from MICA, who thought of these artistic ways that the young people could present what was happening in the community. It wasn't just artwork, but it was work that we would bring in politicians and everyone to see displays that Whitney helped put together. Then the young people said, "well, we want more after school funding, we want summer jobs. We want better places to live." They wanted a state-of-the-art recreation center. We took them to every single recreation center in Baltimore City to see what worked with that, and then a couple in DC. Then we organized to get the first new recreation center built in 30 years, I believe it was in Darley Park community.

Then we organized to get additional funding for afterschool. We had to fight for that every year, but we got additional money for afterschool and community schools. Then summer jobs. We were able to get 2,000 additional summer jobs for young people in Baltimore City. The young people really worked hard. They were diligent. That was over the course of several years.

Then I began to organize all over the city. I was the organizer on the ground in West Baltimore when the whole Freddie Gray arrest happened. I was there for that. I had to knock on doors and talk to people in the neighborhood and see what it is that they really needed. Then I began to work with the Department of Justice to get stories for the report that led to the consent decree. I did that work for a while. I worked with the Department of Justice around a consent decree and then organized.

Speaker 1 ([11:09](#)):

[inaudible 00:11:42] the consent decree. Just for.

Gwen Brown ([11:12](#)):

The consent decree was the last consent decree that was able to be established before the Trump administration took place. What it is, is that the federal government sued the City of Baltimore to do better with their policing efforts. They implemented this decree and they have several years to abide by this decree. If they don't, then the suit will go forward and take place. They can do a lot of penalizing to Baltimore City if they don't abide by trying to do better with the police department, around real police reform. That's what that was, and it's still in place and it's still a whole process. It will be several years that this process will take place. Yes, I did a lot of work around that.

A lot of work all over Baltimore City and West Baltimore and Harlem Park West, I help organize to be able to get them a master plan established because they wanted development in their community. East Baltimore and Darley Park, I organized to get an empty lot, totally redeveloped into a beautiful green space. That took several years. In South Baltimore, I organized with the Latin X community, with the Sacred Heart of Baltimore Church. I spoke like 20 words in Spanish. Sacred Heart of Jesus has about 2,500, I believe, Latin X people there. I was able to recruit that church into the organization, build it. I used to work with.

We began to organize around a lot of those issues that they had problems with, particularly around safety and dealing with the police and all of that. I organized with the Immigration Outreach Service Center, which is another organization that serves immigrants in North Baltimore, but primarily immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Asian communities. Organized with them around issues that they wanted to address. I organized in Southwest Baltimore, primarily to get politicians there because as a neighborhood, it's just like way over there. People don't pay attention to it.

Gwen Brown ([13:42](#)):

Then I did that. Anyway, I've just done similar work, all over Baltimore. I help get turnaround teams to get jobs movement into West Baltimore. I did that as well. I know there are some things that I'm forgetting, but those are like some of the main things that I did.

Speaker 1 ([14:00](#)):

Right. I mean I'm sure, but thank you for sharing the timeline and a lot of the major projects you've worked on. I guess the big question is why? Why do you do all this work and how do you sustain the passion and the energy for the work?

Gwen Brown ([14:20](#)):

One more thing about the consent decree, is I was also a big part of facilitating conversations between the police and the community, which is really how I met Sheree Brisco. She might talk to you about that later. That was a big part.

And the reason why I do it as I go back to my grandmother. People like her migrated here from the South and she had an eighth grade education because at the time a black woman, when she was born that's as far as you could go. You had to move further north, if you wanted to go beyond eighth grade, but people like her they moved here and they were brilliant in that red lining and everything. They still managed to own homes. In my neighborhood, there were only two renters on a block. They took great pride in homes and all of that.

They managed to send children to school and to college, and to really ensure that the next generation did better. But they were never treated like the geniuses that they really were and then they didn't have voices, like they really should. My grandmother she didn't do a lot in the Civil Rights Era, but she knew you needed to vote. There were like certain things that you had to have in place. She would take me to the polls with her when she would vote and everything like that. And everyone around her did this thing.

The church was kind of a place where they could also address some of those things. But their voices weren't heard. I couldn't remember. It was just one place. They called it Old Town Mall then, which is not even there anymore. Back in the day, we should just call it Gay street. They would address her by her last name, like Ms. Tucker. That's the place where I would see white people address her by

her last name. As I began to do this work, in particularly going back to Child First, I thought, wow, everyday people can just like really make a change. Then this gives people a voice.

Through every organizing effort, I always wanted to try to make sure that everyday people were able to make sure that they stood up front and they got to change. That's why I continue to do this work. Just thinking about her, I just think about this allows people like my grandmother and people like myself and people in distressed communities in particular can really have their voices heard. I didn't just work with people in distressed communities. I worked with churches who were very affluent, but I always tried to make sure that they connected in a real way to people that maybe didn't have that much access or just didn't have the financial security that a lot of these people had that attended some of the places where I used to organize.

Speaker 1 ([17:20](#)):

How do you kind of sustain your energy? How do you take care of yourself so that you can keep doing this work?

Gwen Brown ([17:30](#)):

I like to be around young people that helps. Walking, helps. Music. It's just huge for me. The arts. COVID was hard because I just remember I couldn't hear a live performance or couldn't go to a museum or couldn't just be in a place without those sorts of things that feed your spirit. Water, sitting by the water is really my main thing. My faith. Spending time with family. My husband is silly, so he makes me laugh. Nature is huge. That really helps me. That helps me as well.

Speaker 1 ([18:21](#)):

If someone had never come to Baltimore or some of the neighborhoods you've worked in, what would you want them to know about Baltimore and the neighborhoods? What should people know?

Gwen Brown ([18:41](#)):

That it is not The Wire. All of Baltimore is not The Wire. I mean there are segments of it, but there's segments of it in every place where it's kind of like The Wire. There is really beautiful resilient people here, that the culture is so quirky. You could be in neighborhoods that are right next to each other and they look just like each other, but they want totally different things. They have a totally different personality.

There are some really good people here that fight for changes. For instance there was a group, The Mission Continues, that's a post 9/11 veteran group. They go into neighborhoods and they talk to people in the neighborhoods and find out projects that they could work on to help kind of transform a neighborhood. Then there's one, a few times a year where they get veterans from all over the country to come into the neighborhoods. You would hear the veterans say, "we don't hear anything about this". You don't even know people are doing this kind of thing when you see it, when you're not from here and that they are just beautiful places, even within the places that look like it's just totally devastated. You can still find beauty within those places. Those are some of the things that I really want people to know.

Speaker 1 ([20:10](#)):

Thanks, Gwen. You're always a visionary and looking forward. What are some things you hope to see happen in your work or in Baltimore for some of the people or neighborhoods that you've worked in? What are some of your visions for the future or hope?

Gwen Brown ([20:37](#)):

My hope is one of the reasons that I took the position, or sought out and took the position that I have now. I was hoping that some way, some of my efforts could bring some healing to some of the places where I used to work neighborhoods, that I used to be in. There's so much trauma there, but there's a lot of resilience there as well. I hope that somehow some healing comes to Baltimore. I hope that people can see Baltimore for more than what it is and *The Wire* or *Homicide* and all of those other places like that. I hope that people began to really listen to the residents of Baltimore and work around what their needs are. And not just parachute in and say this is what we want to bring, but then not really. It's not even what the neighborhoods want or need. Those are some of my hopes.