The Guardians: Reshaping History Project and Exhibition

Interview with Joy Ross, 2021

Joy Ross (00:01):
Hello. My name is Joy Ross and I live in Harlem Park on Fulton Avenue, currently. I transplanted here in 2003 from Charlotte, North Carolina, and so many people ask me, "Why did you leave Charlotte?" Well, I always felt that once I got my educational degree, I wanted to bring it back to a place where my services could be utilized. And having five children, two biological, three adopted, living in Charlotte gave them a false sense of reality. And it was hard for me to get a lot of their services like Upward Bound and different programs and enrich them while they was growing up. So I saw opportunities in Baltimore. There was commercials that says Live Baltimore during O'Malley's administration, they had the Red Line coming. I figure it's my opportunity to be ahead of the game and go ahead and purchase a house and restore it and reverse my investments.

Joy Ross (01:13):
Long story short, once we moved here, the kids was in total culture shock. The three adopted were from urban cities so it wasn't unusual for them, but the two biological, they came from a Montessori background so they had no clue what it was like living in Baltimore city. Because me and my husband was together and we knew that the family structure began at home, we knew that it would have a strong foundation to survive this, but you couldn't tell them that early on, especially when they had to go to Frederick Douglas High School. But it turns out that our girls were leaders and they were able to acclimate their environment to be more of their environment. Instead of hanging out then they would bring them home because they know as long as you bring your friends home, they can hang at home. It was no hanging out outside the house.

Joy Ross (02:13):
So that's a short skit of how we moved here. So originally I'm from North Carolina. I went to college in New Jersey. Went to Helene Fuld School of Nursing, which is a BSN prepare program, and I got my BSN from Rutgers University, and my husband was a police officer when we met. He wanted to be a sheriff, so he got the opportunity to go to Charlotte. We moved to Charlotte and shortly after 9/11, where we both had to come up and help out in New York for a short period of time, he decided he wanted to be a state trooper. I'm sorry. Well, the only place he could be a state trooper was here in Baltimore because it cut off age was 59 and a half. And at the time he was in his forties. So we schlepped up to Baltimore and this is how we got here.

Speaker 2 (03:15):
Great, thanks. And I guess you can talk about your role in your community and how you see yourself in your neighborhood and community.

Joy Ross (03:29):
I definitely see myself as a leader by default. Initially when I moved here, I wanted to empower the community because I knew I was somewhere I didn't have to be, but I knew that by happenstance, that I could educate people and get them to kind of see things my way. I met a lot of challenges in the
beginning, especially with the home buying process. I was fortunate enough to buy the house through Long & Foster, paid very little to nothing for it. Basically a two weeks income. Determined that we was going to take our skills, because my husband had carpentry, he had a brother that's a plumber and a brother that's an electrician, utilize our family, help reverse our property and be worth it instead of being indebted to it. So I went and talked to my neighbors because no one talked to people when I first moved here, I just couldn't imagine people not saying hi.

Joy Ross (04:35):
They walk out their front door every day and no one speaks like, wow, this is the real urban experience, right? So I said, well, I'm just going to knock on the door and let everyone know who I am and try to figure out who everyone else is around here. And initially they weren't receptive. I got a lot of negative feedback when I talked about how we can get together as community and redo our houses and make them worth something and kind of come together and rally this community together. They was not trying to hear it. The first thing they said, "Oh, if we get a loan on the house then our taxes are going to go up" and I wanted to explain to them, we have a lot of things happening in Baltimore that's going to put you in an impossible position anyway. They weren't trying to hear it.

Joy Ross (05:24):
And they saw me as a rebel. They didn't see me as being someone who can help empower them, as I was the radical one who was coming and disrupting the way life was. Oh, we went to the library, me and the kids. When they did their homework, I went and did some research on Baltimore to understand the rules, the laws, the architect. How did Baltimore become Baltimore? Because where I came from it was a house every three acres apart, in the country. But I've always loved urban architecture. And I found out some things like I can call 311 to get trees, 311 to get the sidewalks repaired, 311 to get the streets done. I'm like, wow, in my home you got to pay for all these services. I can just make a phone call and make it work.

Joy Ross (06:20):
So, of course, me and my husband, we began working on the house and as we're outdoors, we're meeting people and I'm looking at the beautiful... It's not really hilly on Fulton Avenue but it's a nice little slopey type view where you can see all the way from one end of Fulton almost to North Avenue. So I said, I wonder what it would be like if we had trees here. And I remember looking in a book called Baltimore Then & Now, how it looked with trees. So I called forestry. It was so simple. They came and he says, we'll bring you the trees on this day, had someone to come out to put the holes in the ground, next thing I know, trees are up. As the trees came up, the people start coming outside their houses. It was just amazing. So then I figured, well, since the people won't help me help them, then I'll be the one to gather information to bring it to them.

Joy Ross (07:17):
So to keep them empowered and let them know, hey... Because I find that in Baltimore, lot of people has lost hope, they don't believe anymore. And I guess with the Transit Administration, they know things aren't going to happen. So as we got trees, some sidewalk repairs, routine grass removal, then after O'Malley administration we had a community revitalization that was slated for the area, that fell through, and it was sponsored by Bank of America and they just backed out. So the only thing that manifested from that was Harlem Gardens, and I think it's another apartment building across from Lafayette Square that manifested out of that program. But meanwhile, all the houses was torn down,
and where I live at was the last spot that was torn down, Orlando Street and I feel barren. I just couldn't believe houses were torn down just because.

Joy Ross (08:22):
So finally when that fell through, I had a talk with Ms. Campbell and Mr. Ronald Bailey, and I noticed that I had a neighbor, Antoinette, who lived across the street that also was a nurse, but we didn't know each other. And we kind of rallied together to say, you know what, we all got a little college degree, let's see what we can do. We can do something. So that's how we formed our Community Association. And Layla helped teach us how we can find out things that are going on and how we can make things happen for ourselves. But I personally believe that as we got stronger in knowledge and utilized that force that we were meeting adversity with the city, because the city already had plans that did not include us or the community itself, just fine.

Joy Ross (09:14):
My goal is always to see something happen. Not just to let it be and just be forgotten and become a dumping ground. But we were unsuccessful when the Red Line fell through. That lost some of our steam and ice house caught on fire. It was a plan development there, and then it caught on fire, again. We had Mr. Wylie's funeral home that came up, not that we were against it, but we just didn't have an opportunity to have an impact on its location.

Joy Ross (09:55):
Pretty much that was what empowered me, is knowing that I could, as a single voice, make a difference in this town. Just by having all these resources at my fingertips.

Speaker 2 (10:14):
And how would you describe your neighborhood or community to people that aren't from that area?

Joy Ross (10:23):
How would I describe it to people that are not from the area?

Speaker 2 (10:27):
Yeah, people that are not from Baltimore.

Joy Ross (10:29):
It's not desirable. My parents are still living... They live in North Carolina. And when they came up to visit, they was just astonished. It was like, oh my gosh. You ever see the Beverly hillbillies riding in? That's how my parents looked. And the first thing my mom and dad said was, Joy, we didn't raise you this way. Why are you staying here? I says, mom, you did raise us this way. You taught us to give back. You taught us that, do not forget where we came from. And she's like, you didn't come from this. I says, well, maybe not directly but when I was a little girl, my mom went to Howard University and I remember seeing row houses. And I said to myself, one day, I'm going to buy me a row house when I get grown. She says, oh, you was too little, you was only seven. Yeah I was only seven, but that had an impact on me, seeing how people can live so close together and still be so separate.

Joy Ross (11:31):
I love looking at a row house and then being able to go inside and you'd be in a whole different world and next door can be a whole different world. You know what I mean? Every row house can be its own individual world and you're still together. But she wasn't happy. So with Baltimore now, to be honest with you, I couldn't encourage anyone to come and stay here. Not so much of the crime. I think a lot of the crime is crime on crime here.

Joy Ross (12:08):
I just don't think our... I don't think the political scene is organized enough. Like we could get something going today and three months later we have a whole new administration and now things are discombobulated again. And it starts all over again. So we keep spinning this wheel that never gets us anywhere. So I find it very difficult from where I come from. We don't see transient leaders. Usually when there's a plan in place and we elect someone for that plan, we kind of stick it out. Where I come from you will never see a Red Line demolished just like that. I remember going to the different forums and working on Red Line and helping suggest things and give ideas on what I would like to see in the community and to see all that effort gone, it was devastating for me. Because when I lived in North Carolina, that was a big focal point, the commercials. Live Baltimore, Live Baltimore. They talk about how they was going to be connected in 70 and all these things, and you get here and it's like a joke. You know what I mean?

Joy Ross (13:27):
I also remember when they talked about the revitalization, they was working in with the city, but then when you go to Fells Point near Canton, instead of the plans sticking in place to work within, now they push and work without, outside the parameters.

Speaker 2 (13:49):
I'm sure you've heard of the black butterfly, correct?

Joy Ross (13:53):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2 (13:53):
Yeah. And how does that make you feel when you think about where resources are going in the city and, and racist policies and things that impact your neighborhood?

Joy Ross (14:07):
Well, to be honest with you, I don't feel that that's a deterrent. I feel like it's something that we're allowing to happen. I believe a difference can be made when you get the right mixture. And I believe that the reason change hasn't happened because we haven't had the right mixture and the community is so negative. Even when we did get out the vote drive, all I keep hearing the people say is, "Nothing's going to change. Why are we voting?" It took a lot of effort to help them understand that you're voting, not just for change, you're voting because you're relevant. You're voting to say, sometimes you don't have to cast a ballot. I voted because it's my right but yet none of you guys were worthy of my vote. That still gets attention. So we was able to increase the numbers just with that information. We was able to take that negative energy and reverse it to something positive. The force to vote. The force to practice and race. The hope is gone here on the west side and I think that's by design as well.
Joy Ross (15:23):
I've talked to [inaudible 00:15:24]. It's nothing I can say. They're like, "Ms. Joy, you're not from here. I've been in Baltimore all my life." And this and that and this and that. So I don't think... I think some of our community leaders play a huge part in where we are today, because I think sometimes you got to accept a little something to get to some distance. And we have members in our community who fight everything. We want a bench in the park, they're going to fight it because they don't want it to attract people sitting in the park. Well, that's what a park is for. You don't want a basketball court because you don't want young people around, well, you want diversity. You want all people in the community, black, white, gay, straight. It doesn't matter who you are. A community is just what it is.

Joy Ross (16:17):
It's a mixture of everyone.

Speaker 2 (16:19):
Why do you think they're so resistant? Because I've experienced that too.

Joy Ross (16:23):
They're just older. They don't want to see change, and they still reminiscing from a time of what, when, instead of-

Speaker 2 (16:32):
What was.

Joy Ross (16:32):
Right. A time of what could be, you know what I mean? Even myself, with five kids, I struggle with change. "Mom, you got to get cash app on your phone" and this and that because it's a new way of making financial exchange. To me, it's not the way I choose to do it, but I have to get with the times, I'm 55 myself. So I can't expect things to be how they were back in my time. And I just think that the stronger voices are the older voices and they're not taking in consideration of the community encompassing everyone and their ideas. I think Harlem Park is zone 99% residential. And when I tried to explain to people that when you have that much residential and no other resources, then guess who has to pay all the taxes? Residential. I says it's just not a viable community that way, but they don't want to see it any other way.

Speaker 2 (17:50):
So if you were to look at like your hopes for the community over the next 10 years, what were some of your... What would your priorities be or your vision for things for Harlem Park?

Joy Ross (18:03):
I would like to see mixed-use development on the empty land space. I would like to see more people and diverse. I would like to see some youth activities, but my concern with youth activities in the city is there's not a lot of parental involvement. These kids are able to do things by themselves that would make me neurotic as a parent. I mean like literally being alone or walking to a store or whatever, that was not happening with my kids. So I'd like to see a lot of youth things, but I'd like to see things that encompass the parents being involved.
Joy Ross (18:52):
I would like to see more physical transportation versus mechanical, like bicycle, skateboards. I like the scooters, the birds. I would like to see more walking. I don't think what I see is conducive to a community. It's just not. It doesn't necessarily have to be family oriented, but maybe more healthy settings. I don't like seeing kids smoking and using a lot of profanity, but it sounds like it's the new language now. No one acknowledges it anymore. It's a lot of changes I would like to see. Unfortunately, I have to come to the fact that when we have a new administration, then whatever was implemented that was not already in place, things are going to change again. And I've never seen that in any town that I lived in, not even in Jersey, but this is just... As soon as something getting put... I think we worked on that Red Line, at least for the length of time that I was here it was already enforced. I had to get down to the point where the money has made the transfer. That was significant.

Speaker 2 (20:29):
That was at the state level of shutdown, correct? When governor Hogan came in?

Joy Ross (20:30):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2 (20:31):
I remember people were-

Joy Ross (20:33):
We was livid. Transportation is everything when you talk about jobs and if you talking about green and keeping things clean, and it's not conducive for every household to have a car.

Speaker 2 (20:44):
Right. Every major city it's high functioning and there's transportation for people.

Joy Ross (20:51):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Speaker 2 (20:52):
And right now in Baltimore, you really can't get from east side to west side very easily without a car.

Joy Ross (20:58):
No you cannot.

Speaker 2 (21:00):
And the kids that ride the bus across town, it takes them an hour and a half or more to get to school. So no wonder they're late. So you come with this energy and vision and radical thought and you saw some things happen again with, or not happen with Red Line and other stuff. You've seen some positive change happen, but with all that, what keeps your spirit going and how do you keep doing this work? Why do you keep doing this work?
Joy Ross (21:31):
I ask myself that all the time. I'm running late for you because I'm doing 311's in the community because we had some dumping last night. I can't tell you what drives me because community service, where I came from, it was just what we did. There was nothing that governs us. We live in the south, we see paper, we pick it up. We clean up when we see where it's needed. No one said to me that you can get 75 credits to graduate because of community service. It was something that was just ingrained in us. So I don't know. Me and my husband, we still have a home in Charlotte and we not ready to leave the city because I love the energy of living in the city.

Joy Ross (22:29):
I love the movement. I love people. In the south, you don't get a chance to see people at their rawness because everyone either leave their house and drive and go where they got to go and then come back. It's not south anymore. But here sometimes when I think of Baltimore, I think of it as being a merry-go-round. When I want to get out and play, I can go out and play. When I get tired, I get off the merry-go-round, I go in my house and I feel like I'm not in the city. So I don't know what keeps me here.

Joy Ross (23:08):
I don't want to lose hope. I want to continue to believe that change can happen. I don't know how it's going to happen. We're working on the master plan for the community, again, that has not been done since the year I was born, which is in '66. So I'm excited to be a part of that. I know there's change happening to West Baltimore. I don't know if I want to live through it to see it, or live to see it distantly. My career is one thing that definitely keeps me here because healthcare is a huge industry here and it is so much that's needed. And I did start a business here because of Baltimore. So I wanted to continue to capitalize and provide the service to people who otherwise probably couldn't get it, or it wouldn't be an issue if I was in North Carolina.

Speaker 2 (24:11):
Would you just state what your business is.

Joy Ross (24:14):
Oh, the name of the business is called Concepts in Healthcare. And the reason I named it Concepts in Healthcare is I had an opportunity to meet a physician at John Hopkins many years ago when I was working for Interim Healthcare, right before they was closing down their home care part. And Interim promised to be a subcontractor for some of his clinical trials and Interim was "Okay, we're getting out of here. We're selling our Medicare license. You're going to have to find another vendor." And his name is Dr. Reda Girgis. I thought it was a girl until I heard him on the phone. I didn't know they named men Reda. And he says, "I need a nurse." I said, what kind of nurse? He says, "I'm running this clinical trial for pulmonary hypertension and I need a nurse to go see my patients."

Joy Ross (25:04):
So he told me to go look up clinical trial and see what it was about. How retention in the studies was an issue and people who entered in study was healthy subjects who had to work and who did not have time to come to his doctor's office two to three times a week. So I read about how clinical trials work and I'm like, well, it's what we already do in home care. We draw blood, we drop the specimens off. He said, "Well, what do you charge me?" I said, "I don't know, I have to think about it." He says, "you don't have but a day." He was very frank and direct, right? He says, "You need to get your business up and
running and then we'll do the contracts and I'll give you my patients." He said, "I'm going to start you off with like four."

Joy Ross (25:47):
And then he says, after four, then he said, "You can get up to 30 or 40 patients, but they need to be seen every two weeks." He literally gave me an order and I wasn't even working for him. But in our clinical world, you have to abide by a doctor's order. So I talked to the sites that conducts his studies, which ended up giving... He gives the work to and they manage the study throughout the United States. He was just one part of it and I was managing the one in Maryland. So I got everything started, and I'm like, you know what? This is going to be difficult because this really isn't healthcare, as we know it through the department of mental health and human hygiene, but it falls into health care. So I had to hire a lawyer and get him to write up the rights and the rules and the policies for me to reflect what I do, because it wasn't something that's traditional on the nursing that would give me the oversight.

Joy Ross (26:42):
I would be working on the FDA. So FDA has a different protocol, which is good clinical practice. So anyway, we got all the paperwork done, took all his assignments. And from there, I'm like, you know what? I'm in my own business. But the name came about because almost everything in health care that I was able to discover, there was a facet of it that was unaddressed, but could not be met by insurance companies or a reimbursable source. Just like now with the pandemic. I started working on injectable solutions about a year and a half ago because I wanted to start off giving vaccines at home because we have a huge population of people who are home bound and bed bound. I was like, wow, how do these people get back and forth to the doctor's office for just basic things like getting your flu shot every year, or maybe a lot of our elderly population get B12 injections every year?

Joy Ross (27:42):
You have to pay all these hundreds of dollars with transportation to get to the doctor, the uncomfortable eight hours just to get back home. So I said, I'm going to start this service and it's going to be another concept in healthcare. That's where the whole name came about. So in the process I was doing research and then of course we had a pandemic. So now I'm thinking, you know what, they're mandating that everyone has to have the vaccination. How are home bound patients going to get the vaccinations? Because the only way you can work as an independent employee in this state, unless you have a nursing license. So are they going to manage it? So nurses come out to the home and everyone ran into a roadblock when the insurance company says they will not pay for a nurse just to perform one task that doesn't require the skill of a nurse, because the nurse doesn't have to give injection, but you need a nurse to oversee the process.

Speaker 2 (28:48):
Wild. Was there anything else, Ms. Joy, you want to share about your story or something you helped make happen in your neighborhood?

Joy Ross (28:58):
There's lots of things I want to do for our neigh... So much. But I find that it's our resources that get into the way, our political resources. We've been trying to get cameras forever on Fulton Avenue. Every time it's always, "Oh, you need to do a traffic study." We had a traffic study done. They send someone out at five o'clock in the morning when nobody's... Everything is so antiquated. We need speed bumps on Kirby
lane. "Oh, we can't put speed bumps on Kirby Lane." They already knew they had a plan to shut down Harriet Tubman, anyway. So our city officials are not cohesive with the community, as they say.

Joy Ross (29:43):
When I first moved here, things were a little bit more seamless, getting trees. Now trying to get trees replaced is a task. Getting trash. I can't even talk about the trash situation because obviously we had a pandemic. So I can't complain about that because they didn't have the resources to have the trash pick up. But I think when Sheila Dixon took away the trash day, it had a huge impact on the communities as well, because now it's set up another resource funding for fines and excessive fees for your trash being not in a can and people's cans were being stolen. It's just so much.

Speaker 2 (30:35):
Yeah. I hear a lot of other leaders stories seems like a lot of the same struggles in different neighborhoods throughout Baltimore. I wonder... It's kind of related to the last question, but are there other women leaders, I know you work with Antoinette and Layla, but are you connected or do you feel connected with other leaders across Baltimore?

Joy Ross (31:06):
No. Well, some. Ina, she lives in Sandtown, Arlene Fisher, Steven Preston, he lives in Patterson Park, he's able to help us to get things done. Ronald Bailey, Cedonia, he's able to help us get things done because his wife used to be the personal assistant to, what's her name? Pugh.

Speaker 2 (31:34):
Isn't that crazy? Also I see what it's like, it really is about who you know.

Joy Ross (31:40):
Mm-hmm (affirmative). Who you know. So I could call Ronald Bailey and he can pick up the phone and they out there within hours getting the trash. He called solid waste and we could be calling for weeks and weeks and weeks. Gwen has been a wonderful asset to us. We can call her too and get help that we needed. John Bullock. And that's it I can think of.

Speaker 2 (32:08):
Do you get phone calls a lot from community members and stuff?

Joy Ross (32:12):
Mainly emails.

Speaker 2 (32:13):
Emails?

Joy Ross (32:14):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).
And what's your role right now with the Community Association?

Joy Ross (32:18):
I'm the president of Harlem Park West. We develop Harlem Park West. We try to get things done with Harlem Park Neighborhood Council, and we found that it was unproductive. Everything we wanted to happen couldn't happen. We've had developers, we got involved with bills. Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development, we got involved with them and everything that we wanted done, it was a no. No, you have to go through Neighborhood Council. And it was more so about power than productivity.

Joy Ross (32:58):
So what we did was we branched off the outermost corner of Harlem Park and named it Harlem Park West, in the boundaries that we live in to try to get some things happening. And we did, and it allowed us to come together a little better, but we still have some challenges dealing with the council. They're the oldest community resource in the area, and as you can see the least productive when it comes to getting things to happen.

Speaker 2 (33:34):
And who's your council person?

Joy Ross (33:36):
Bullock.

Speaker 2 (33:36):
Bullock. Yeah.

Joy Ross (33:38):
He's a new kid on the block, but he was voted into the house to get things done, and he's really trying, but he's meeting a lot of challenges with the different types of development, but we have so much land space.

Speaker 2 (33:55):
Yeah you do.