Round and Round Together

Taking a Merry-Go-Round Ride into the Civil Rights Movement

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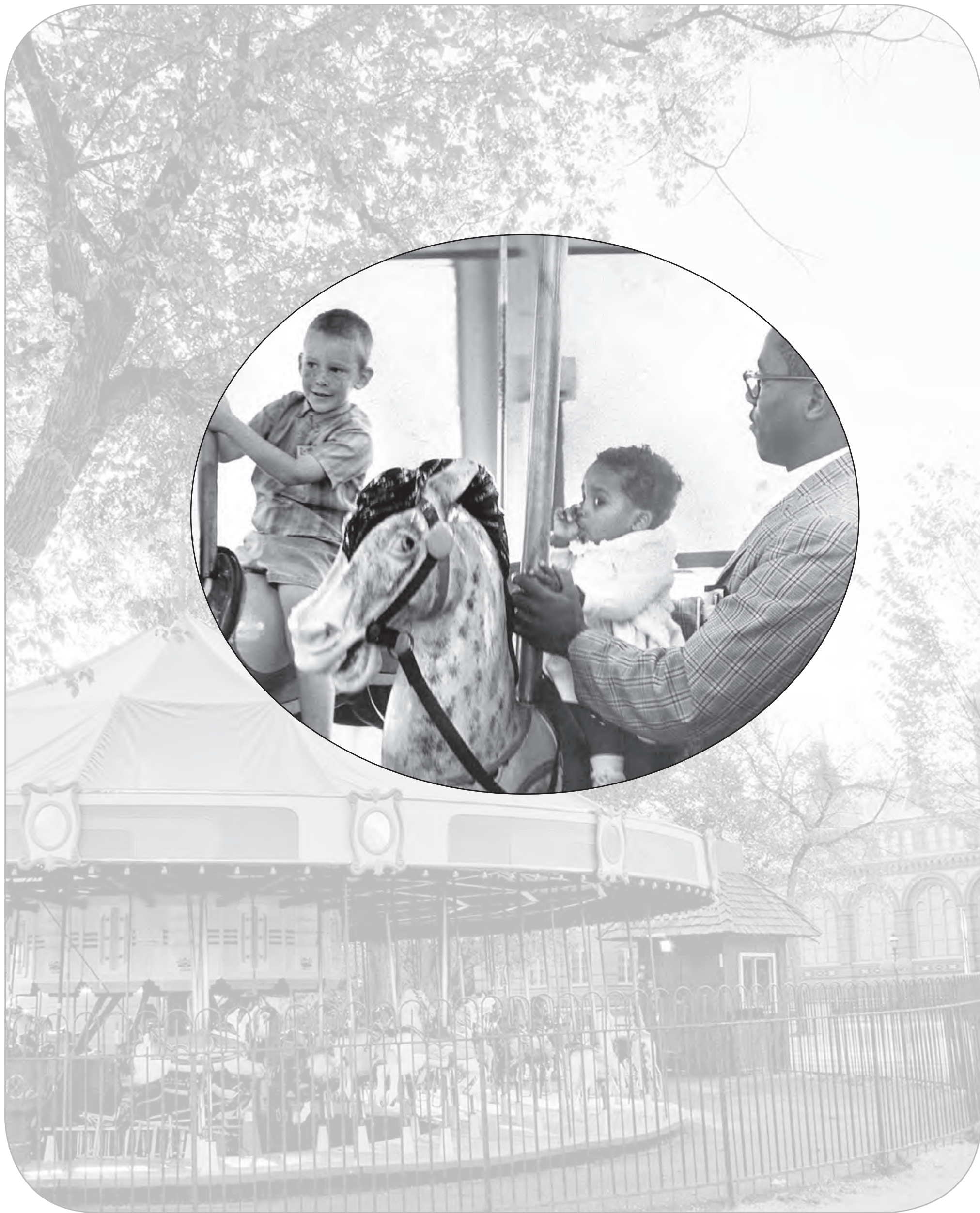

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A SPECIAL RIDE

A HIGHLIGHT OF MANY VISITS to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., is having a chance to climb aboard a classic, old-time merry-go-round. What a treat for kids and adults alike to settle into the saddle of a handsome wooden horse, grip the reins, and let imaginations wander as the horse glides up and down, circling round and round, while jingling music fills the air.

In addition to being a beauty, this merry-go-round is part of history—not just because it's more than sixty years old and sits in front of the headquarters of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum complex.

This merry-go-round gained its spot in history because of a little girl in a pink dress and the ride she took on one of its dappled horses on August 28, 1963. On that hot summer day, the merry-go-round had not yet taken up its position on the National Mall. It was still part of Gwynn Oak Amusement Park, located about forty miles away on the outskirts of Baltimore, Maryland.

Sharon Langley, the history-making young rider, was a month shy of her first birthday when her parents took her to Gwynn Oak Park that Wednesday. Newspaper reporters swarmed around the

Facing page: Sharon Langley with her father, Charles C. Langley, Jr., on the merry-go-round at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park, August 28, 1963.

family, asking questions and snapping photos of Sharon's historic ride. The next day, newspapers in several cities across the nation reported on her amusement park visit.

What was so history-making about a little girl riding a merry-go-round? The fact that she and her family were able to enter the park at all, without being harassed, beaten, or arrested. For nearly seventy years, Gwynn Oak's owners had kept African American families like the Langleys out of the park. Black youngsters weren't allowed to ride on the merry-go-round or on any of the park's other attractions. A whites-only policy of racial segregation had been the rule.

On August 28, 1963, the park finally changed its rules, as a result of nearly ten years of protests. For the first time, African Americans were able to enter the park and buy tickets, just like everyone else.

Sharon Langley was the first black child to go on a ride there that day. Her father stood next to her, keeping a firm grip on his young daughter so she wouldn't slip out of the saddle. On either side of Sharon was a white youngster. As the merry-go-round's creaky wooden platform picked up speed, skin tones blended in a blur of happy faces. A gentle breeze fluttered the frilly collar on Sharon's dress. Three kids—one black and two white—each perched on a beautiful horse, were sitting side by side, going up and down, round and round, having fun together.

It's a scene that would have brought a smile to the face of a man who was busy that day making history himself about an hour's drive away in Washington, D.C.—the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This was the day Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in front of hundreds of thousands of people gathered near the National Mall for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Dr. King spoke about his dream that one day African American children would no longer be treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, that all kids—white and black—would treat each other as sisters and brothers.

Sharon Langley's merry-go-round ride gave hope that Dr. King's dream might come true. If kids could learn to have fun together at

Two white youngsters rode on either side of Sharon Langley during her first merry-go-round ride at Gwynn Oak.

Courtesy Baltimore Sun

this park, the scene of turmoil for so many years, then maybe people could learn to get along elsewhere, too.

A HOPE—AND A WARNING

There were no riots at Gwynn Oak as Sharon rode on her merry-go-round horse that day, nor were there any in the weeks to come. Letting reality live up to the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence turned out not to be impossible or as scary as some had feared. One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery during the Civil War, the country was beginning to fulfill the promise of freedom for all.

However, that little girl's merry-go-round ride also warned that making Dr. King's dream come true everywhere would be difficult indeed. Changing just this one amusement park took nearly ten years of protests. Summer after summer, from 1955 to 1963, protestors tried to end segregation there. They walked picket lines, carried signs, wrote letters, tried to reason with the park's owners, and sometimes were assaulted and arrested.

The citizens—both black and white—who demonstrated at Gwynn Oak during those years included college students, teachers, professors, social workers, housewives, union members, lawyers, religious leaders, community organizers, journalists, teenagers, elementary school kids, and even some politicians. One family that played a key role traced its ancestry back to both an African chief and a slave-owning signer of the Declaration of Independence. These varied participants showed that it takes more than a famous leader to make history and bring about change. Also essential are many so-called "ordinary" people, who prove by their courage and commitment that they're not ordinary after all. These dedicated individuals were determined to keep protesting until every child had the right to ride that beautiful merry-go-round—even though it took nearly a decade.

CHANGING MINDS

"When you look back at it, it's rather silly that it took so long. Things were set in people's minds. Segregation is the way it had always been and people came to believe that's the way it's got to be. If we had just let all our kids go there and play, they would have been playing together without thinking about race at all," said Charles Mason. He was 25 years old in 1963, fresh out of Baltimore's largely black Morgan State College (now Morgan State University). That summer, this young activist helped organize demonstrations at Gwynn Oak that were much larger and far more effective than protests in previous years. The dramatic demonstrations he helped plan for 1963 succeeded—finally—in opening up the park to all.

That summer's protests featured bold new tactics that hadn't been directed at the park before. Over the years, Baltimoreans had tried a variety of strategies at Gwynn Oak. The changing menu of methods provides a good illustration of the evolving tactical lineup being used during those years by the civil rights movement as a whole.

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Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his "I Have a Dream" speech, August 28, 1963, at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The Gwynn Oak campaign spanned an important period in civil rights history—from 1955 to 1963—beginning a few months before Dr. King made his first appearance on the protest scene and ending the same summer as his monumental March on Washington.

During those nine years, Baltimore activists sometimes found themselves ahead of the curve in trying new strategies. At other times, Baltimoreans adopted tactics that had proved successful elsewhere in the country. Baltimore protestors were dedicated volunteers who learned gradually along the way what worked—and what didn't—in their quest to bring a peaceful end to an unjust social system. They allied themselves with various civil rights organizations, groups that competed and disagreed with each other at times but pulled together at important moments, putting

differences aside to achieve their common goal. It was the same kind of on-the-job learning that civil rights activists around the country experienced. They all were searching for just the right combination of tactics to exert enough pressure on people to persuade them to have the courage to do the right thing and end segregation.

Figuring out which strategies worked was a dynamic, changing process, spurred forward in the final years by the impatient energy of young people such as Charles Mason, who was fed up with waiting for things to improve. Some who participated in the climactic 1963 demonstrations at Gwynn Oak were a good deal younger than Mr. Mason, including two little boys, ages six and eight, who were hauled off in a police car with their parents and baby brother. An 11-year-old girl helped that summer, too, by going on an undercover mission at the park with her aunt. Photos and stories about these kids appeared in newspapers and played a role in bringing an end to the park's unfair rules, showing that regular folks, kids included, can make a difference.

"IT WAS SYMBOLIC"

It may seem puzzling that so many people spent so much time and energy trying to open up an amusement park when there were more serious problems of discrimination in the areas of education, jobs, and housing. Baltimore activists were working hard on those issues, too. But a park that kept toddlers from riding a merry-go-round just because of skin tone seemed so obviously unfair that it stood out as a symbol of a whole system of discrimination that needed to change. "Gwynn Oak was the mountaintop of the Baltimore civil rights demonstrations," said Judge Robert Watts. This Morgan graduate was a young lawyer in 1963, offering his services for free to hundreds of protestors arrested in the final demonstrations that ended segregation at Gwynn Oak.

"It was symbolic, as so many things were," explained Robert Bell, who became chief judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals

WHY AMUSEMENT PARKS

About four months before the August 1963 March on Washington, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested during demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. While in jail, he wrote a letter (published later) in which he explained why he protested. One of his reasons: "When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

in 1996. He was arrested as a teenager in 1960 for trying to integrate a Baltimore restaurant. "Who cares whether you could go, other than the fact that you can. It's symbolic. You choose your battles and go with those things that have the least reason to be challenged. If you can get those out of the way, then you can move more easily to go after the bigger things."

Gwynn Oak had a special importance to Baltimore activists because neighborhoods near the park were becoming increasingly African American. "A lot of the kids who lived in that area wanted to know why they couldn't go there," said Marie Williams, who, as a 20-year-old, helped sign up demonstrators for the 1963 protests. "I didn't care that I couldn't go to Gwynn Oak, because I wasn't an amusement park person. I didn't like being way up in the air and being dropped down. I picketed and did all this for someone else, for later on down the years."

"I'm not sure that it was not being able to go to an amusement park that was so offensive as not having the *right* to go if I wanted to," added Mary Sue Welcome, a 19-year-old Gwynn Oak protestor in 1963. By 2010, she had become one of Maryland's assistant

attorneys general. "I was doing my part, trying to make things better in my little corner of the world."

LIVING HISTORY

The Gwynn Oak victory was just one among many in the long struggle to end segregation. However, it left behind a concrete symbol that can remind people of the many small steps that had to be taken in order to create a more just society: the merry-go-round ridden by an African American youngster on August 28, 1963.

This merry-go-round made its way to the National Mall because of a hurricane that damaged Gwynn Oak Amusement Park so severely that the park closed permanently. However, the merry-go-round weathered the storm. A company that runs concession stands at the Smithsonian bought it. In 1981, it moved to Washington's National Mall to a prime spot right in front of the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building.

Renamed the Carousel on the Mall, it has given rides for decades to thousands of kids—and grown-ups, too—who visit Washington, people of all races, religions, and nationalities. A short stroll away is the Lincoln Memorial, on whose steps Dr. King stood in August 1963 to deliver his famous speech.

The Smithsonian concessionaire didn't choose Gwynn Oak's merry-go-round because of its role in the civil rights movement. He chose it because it was a large, sturdy example of a classic carousel (the French name for a merry-go-round). But knowing about the merry-go-round's history adds a special meaning to climbing onboard. Riding round and round on it can serve as a reminder of a little girl's 1963 ride, which offered a sweetly hope-filled promise of Dr. King's dream brought to life, a symbol of the harmony he sought.

A ride on this merry-go-round can also illustrate the long struggle that led to its liberation. A merry-go-round circles its riders round and round without getting them anywhere, depositing them back where they started. For many years, protesting at

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Since 1981, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., has been home to the merry-go-round that Sharon Langley rode at Gwynn Oak in 1963.

TERMINOLOGY

"We have evolved from colored to Negro, to blacks, to African Americans," said Rev. Marion C. Bascom, a civil rights activist in Baltimore during the 1960s, commenting in 2006 on the changing names used over the years for Americans of African ancestry. "Colored" was common in the early 1900s, even finding its way into the name of the NAACP (founded in 1909)—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "Negro" was in use in the 1940s when the United Negro College Fund started. However, those two terms fell out of favor during the 1960s, replaced by "black" and "African American," which are the ones used in this book, except for direct quotes from people speaking or writing in earlier years.

Gwynn Oak must have felt like riding a merry-go-round, going round and round without coming any closer to ending segregation. And yet, an idea for a different way forward emerged from the protestors' persistence, leading to victory at last.

In its new life on the National Mall, this merry-go-round shows how far the country has come, as visitors of different backgrounds and ages share a fun experience together, while strains of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" fill the air, providing a sense of hope for a troubled world, not unlike the hope for a better future that kept Gwynn Oak protestors going.

TELLING THE TALE

This book tells the tale of the nearly decade-long struggle to liberate that once whites-only merry-go-round, weaving its story into that of the civil rights movement as a whole to show how demonstrations occurring elsewhere influenced the Gwynn Oak protestors.

Understanding what was involved in achieving this one step forward at Gwynn Oak can give a greater appreciation for what the wider civil rights struggle was like. The concerned Baltimoreans who kept trying different tactics and adapting their protest strategies were typical of civil rights volunteers in other cities and towns, all chipping away as best they could until the walls of segregation came crumbling down.