

Name of Interviewee: Dr. Renee Baskerville

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Interviewer: Jane Eliasof

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Location: Crane House and Historic YWCA

Introduction:

Dr. Renee Baskerville is a pediatrician and, at the time of the interview, was the Councilwoman representing Montclair's Fourth Ward. The Baskerville family has resided in Montclair since the 1800s and has established a tradition of achievement and leadership, particularly in the area of civil rights. Born in the mid-1950s, she had a front row seat, at her parents' kitchen table at their home in the South End, to the meetings where her family members and many others of all backgrounds came together to advocate and work toward fair housing, equity in education, and other civil rights issues. Indeed, her family brought the Rice v. Board of Education lawsuit which led to the integration of the Montclair Public Schools, which she discusses at length.

Dr. Baskerville recalls growing up in the Township of Montclair's South End near today's Canterbury Park, which was built during her childhood. She recalls various stores and shops her family went to, primarily in the South End. In talking about the close-knit community, she says "everyone knew each other, and that is why [I] raised my son in [Montclair] as well." She also attended the Unitarian Church and had a diverse group of friends.

Dr. Baskerville discusses the various forms of racism she experienced personally growing up in Montclair, and her thoughts on racism today. She also expresses her concern about increased residential developments in Montclair, delving into the importance of making certain that people are not being displaced in town due to economic increase, and how it is our responsibility as a community to make sure that this does not happen.

Timestamps:

[0:00]: Dr. Renee Baskerville was born in 1956. Her family has been in Montclair for a long time. She is not sure of the exact date that her great, great grandfather arrived here, but she notes that her grandfather, Charles Baskerville, Sr., had already been working for the Township of Montclair for 33 years in 1927, so she believes her great,

great grandparents must have arrived much earlier in the 1800s. Charles Baskerville, Sr. was the first African American, at that time called Negro, appointed to a position of Superintendent in the Township of Montclair. He was the Superintendent of Sewers and Streets. This was a notable appointment for those times. He had been a truck driver for/in the Township prior to that. He was able to purchase a home on Willowmere Avenue in the South End of Montclair; his sister Idabelle Baskerville also purchased a home on Willowmere Avenue; and later on Dr. Baskerville's father built his home in the backyard of her "grandad's" home, which had a Pierpont Drive address.

[2:19] Her grandfather attended some years at Montclair High School but she's not sure if he graduated. Her father Charles Baskerville, Jr. was a graduate of Montclair High School and then

went on to Howard University where he majored in music. He also attended Morgan State University. While at Howard University, he met and married Dr. Baskerville's mom. They lived in Cleveland for a time but then returned to Montclair.

[2:54]: The Baskerville family was always very involved in trying to shape the Township of Montclair and integrate the township. They were very active with the NAACP and many township activities. This legacy of involvement and understanding of the direction Montclair was striving to move in was one of the reasons her dad returned to Montclair to raise his family, even though the town was not well integrated at that time in the 1950s. Her parents made Montclair their home, and they were very active in town. Her father started the Civil Rights Commission – he was one of the charter members. Also, the Fair Housing Commission. He also served on the Zoning Board of Adjustments for the Township of Montclair. At that time, housing patterns were extremely segregated, and Montclair was not compliant with existing laws involving integrated education systems and other things. The NAACP spearheaded efforts to correct such issues. They worked in partnership with the religious institutions of the town, and not just with the historically Black religious institutions, but Jewish residents and Unitarian Universalists in particular were very involved as well. While some people may have had the perception that it was solely Black people fighting for fair housing and equitable educational opportunities, she remembers people of all backgrounds fighting for fair housing and an equitable school district.

[5:04] She recalls “the privilege” of sitting at her family’s kitchen table – where most of the meetings on these topics were held then– and she “realized that there were many people of good will from all backgrounds,” as far back as the 1950s which she could remember first-hand.

[5:25]: When asked to talk about her family’s efforts related to fair housing, she recalled that when she was a young child, people set up “stings.” For example, if a Black family was trying to purchase a home off of Grove Street near neighborhoods that were predominantly white but were denied or informed the home was no longer for sale, they would send a white woman to inquire if the house was available and it certainly was. She recalls Maddie Bass (?), a white woman who was involved in many of these efforts. There were many legal battles related to housing issues. As a child, she and her identical twin sister would hang out in the kitchen to listen in on these stings, which were exciting in a way to a child, but naturally not for the discriminatory aspects. These legal battles, led by the NAACP and many others in the township who wanted to help end discriminatory housing practices in town, went on for many years, and slowly more doors were opened. She notes that despite the wonderful efforts throughout the years since those stings in the 1950s, there is still a distinct color line in town today. Despite people moving here specifically for the town’s diversity, not everyone involved is supportive. She had some white friends tell her that realtors discouraged them from moving into the South End of town or historically African American neighborhoods. We’ve come a very long way, but she feels there are still forms of discrimination here in town.

[8:30]: She is concerned with racism today because of a lack of discussion of it. She feels that respectful dialogue will produce change, and that people need to be open to talking about successes of the past and areas that still need work. There is a lot of development in town now, which is a positive sign, but she wants to ensure that people are not being driven out of town for economic reasons.

[9:20]: The interviewer asks Dr. Baskerville to discuss the schools and her family’s involvement to integrate them. Through the NAACP, her dad and uncle George Rice – for whom the Rice

case was named [Rice v. Montclair Board of Education, 1966] -- and many, many others in the Township of Montclair came together and fought for equity in education. She provides some history on the school system: Southwest School was built to maintain segregation for residents of South Mountain Avenue who did not want their children to attend Nishuane School, which was historically African American at that time. The Minnie A. Lucey School, near Montclair's border with Glen Ridge, was built for predominantly Italian American residents around Pine Street so they would have a school for Italian residents. Montclair often acted to maintain segregation. As the laws pertaining to segregation changed nationally, Montclair residents began to speak up for educational equity for Black students who often contended with leftover, used books handed down from other schools. In Montclair, separate was NOT equal, and people demanded that Black children receive the same access to the best educational settings. Many, many people in the township, especially African Americans, felt that an integrated school district was the answer, but not all agreed. A dear friend of Dr. Baskerville's and also a former Councilwoman, Bobby Riley, was not in favor of school integration. In this time, before the Rice v. Board of Education lawsuit was initiated, Dr. Baskerville was pleased to have had the opportunity to interview several of the people most actively involved in efforts to desegregate the schools and get a more equitable education system in Montclair: Bobby Riley, her mom Marge Baskerville, Joe Green (an NAACP President at the time), Larry Richardson, Loretta Hodge. [Dr. Baskerville refers to an audiotape of that interview.]

[13:05] She describes Bobby Riley as eloquent speaker and a powerful and brilliant woman. Dr. Baskerville credits Bobby Riley for helping her find her own voice, as Dr. Baskerville was somewhat reserved as a child. In one of many classes taken at the Y, Dr. Baskerville took a Drama class with Bobby Riley. She taught Dr. Baskerville to "project from the diaphragm" and gave her tips for speaking to a crowd which Dr. Baskerville continues to rely on. However, Dr. Baskerville does not know the reasons behind Bobby Riley's objection to integrated schools. She mentions that some felt the African American children were getting excellent educations from the Black educators who not only taught what was in the books, but also nurtured the students ("family love"); some felt Black students may not have gotten that nurturing from teachers in predominantly white schools with white teachers. Some considered it an insult to imply that the Black children needed to be educated by white teachers or to sit among white classmates to achieve, because the achievements of Montclair's Black students was outstanding already – with many successful doctors, lawyers, educators, and other professionals.

[16:30]: For the Baskerville family and others, however, the push for integration was much greater than that. They weren't fighting for integration in order to achieve greatness, they felt it was important to acknowledge that everyone can bring something different to the table and benefits when all come together, and both white and Black children would be better off and become richer people by sharing backgrounds and experiences that would not otherwise be shared in segregated situations. Also, because the historically Black schools in town did not receive the same quality of educational materials as the white schools, that inequity needed to be addressed. Those in favor of integrating the schools felt that if the schools remained separate, the Black schools would continue to be treated as secondhand. Dr. Baskerville acknowledges the importance of children seeing people they identify with as their teachers, and at the same time the need for children from an early age to be around others of all backgrounds, religions, races, and all hues to avoid the issues of the past.

[18:15]: Dr. Baskerville then provided more details on the Rice v. Board of Education lawsuit. After many, many failed attempts at desegregation of the schools and pushback on many fronts including the Mayor, the Superintendent, white parents threatening to remove their children from the Montclair Public Schools and move out of town, they realized that they could not move their integration efforts forward in a timely way without litigation. Her family filed a lawsuit against the Montclair Board of Education, which remains under legal obligation to maintain our schools in an integrated way. Dr. Baskerville explains how it impacted her as a student. She was already a student at Nishuane at the time, which she attended grades K-6; she attended Hillside for grades 7 and 8; and then Montclair High School. The lawsuit initiated during her time at Nishuane, when she was probably in 4th grade. By the time the initial steps at integration started, bussing, she was in fifth and sixth grade at Nishuane. While she remained at Nishuane, white students from Edgemont and other places were bused to Nishuane. Her father's family was heavily involved with the St. Paul's Baptist Church while her mother taught Sunday school at the Unitarian Church. The Unitarian congregation was diverse, with Jewish people, white Protestants, and others also attending. Thus, even as a child, Dr. Baskerville was around people with diverse backgrounds. So when white students arrived at Nishuane, it was not a shock to her. As a child, being aware of the efforts that were underway to integrate the schools and of the victories that were being achieved to provide better access to the best in the Montclair school district was exciting. Dr. Baskerville described this as a time of turmoil, followed by changes. She wonders if Montclair today is too complacent, averse to turmoil – in the form of peaceful activism – to achieve change. Many people resisted the changes brought about by the lawsuit, such as bussing, but the changes continued through the years. Dr. Baskerville expressed her gratitude for her parents and the many other Montclair families that struggled together, stood up, and made those changes possible.

[22:26]: At one time, Montclair was the school district that others looked to for integration, and while she feels we've made great progress, she feels that the district is not yet fully integrated. She notes that there is still a form of tracking in the district, whether referred to as "tracking," or "Honors AP," or "exceptional student," there are still ways to separate some students from others. She prefers a system that allows high performing students to help other students to achieve higher, citing studies where students learn better from those of similar age. She advocates for inclusion on all levels, and, in her opinion, only then would Montclair have a truly integrated school district.

[25:05]: She was asked to discuss how her childhood impacted her career and activities as an adult. Dr. Baskerville is a physician and a musician, a cellist. She attended Oberlin College in Ohio as an undergrad and played cello there. Her father, also a musician, was the first African American to conduct the Madrigals at Montclair High School – while a student – which was also unheard of, especially since there were so few African American students at the time. She recalls pictures of him directing a group of mostly his white, fellow students, probably in the 1930s. He also played piano for the Negro Choir and played the organ at St. Paul's and Union Baptist Church. Her father was quite a musician, with perfect pitch. As an undergraduate student at Oberlin, she was undecided on her profession. She loved sports, and thought she was going to be a gym teacher. She loved playing cello but realized that would not be her career. She leaned toward biology, chemistry, psychology but was still undecided. Her twin sister graduated with top grades from almost every school she ever attended, setting a very high bar. Although Dr.

Baskerville was enjoying high school, her sister set a goal that both of them would graduate high school in three years. Her sister attended Douglas.

At Oberlin, she was drawn to the Baptist Church teachings through its music, having primarily attended the Unitarian Church growing up in Montclair. Her sister decided that they would graduate college in three years. Dr. Baskerville was having a good time playing sports at Oberlin. She ran track with Tommie Smith, who was her track coach. [Tommie Smith, a gold medalist in the 200-meter race in the 1968 Summer Olympics raised a black-gloved fist as a Black Power symbol while on the podium during the playing of the national anthem during the medals ceremony.]

[28:42]: She graduated from Oberlin with a degree in Biology and minors in Chemistry and Psychology. She was still undecided on a career path, although she recognized a love of working with children. She came back to Montclair and taught at Montclair High School for a year in a program, with Montclair educator and coach Mr. Raymond Spivey, to help at-risk students. One day, she was walking down Broad Street in Newark and had a conversation with Dr. E. Wyman Garrett, an African American man who was on the Board at UMDNJ [University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey] who asked about her career plans. It turns out he knew her parents from Howard, and he offered her a summer internship at UMDNJ in the Students for Medicine program. She then became a physician. He was responsible for opening the door to many African American and Latina people into outstanding careers in medicine and dentistry professions. She has now been a physician for 32 years. Although she had been out of touch with him for some time, he had recently attended one of her Fourth Ward meetings and she was able to reconnect for a period, but he passed away recently.

[32:20]: She enjoyed learning about the human body and physiology. She reiterates that she could have been a gym teacher, but she went into medicine. She maintained a practice in Newark, as she was committed to serving lower income populations. She talks about working hard to become a physician – having to study hard and overcome hurdles. Dr. Baskerville feels that it is everyone's birthright to have good medical care regardless of their means, and despite lucrative offers to leave Newark, she remained. She had an arrangement with the Montclair school district that she would provide healthcare to any student who did not have insurance. She feels blessed and enjoys her roles as a pediatrician and a Councilwoman!

[35:08]: She is currently the pediatrician for the East Orange school district early childhood department. In 2008, when she decided to run for office in Montclair Township, she gave up her Newark practice, knowing that her role as Councilwoman would require so much of her time, and she would not be able to continue to support her patients with the intense degree of involvement that she was committed to. She knew where every patient of hers was in school, and how that child was doing. She did house calls until 2008, providing as much as she could for the families in her care.

[37:32]: Dr. Baskerville then explained how her family moved to Montclair. Her family came up from Baskerville, Virginia, not far from North Carolina. Her grandfather's father came up to Montclair. Her great-grandmother Tweety, on her grandmother Ruth's side, had a home here in Montclair on Gray Street off Grove Street; she was a seamstress. Her Nana Ruth who married her grandfather was a nurse. Two of Dr. Baskerville's aunts, as well as her parents, were Howard graduates. Her twin sister also went to law school at Howard. Dr. Baskerville is the only one who did not graduate from Howard! She is very close with her twin sister. Dr. Baskerville's sister is

the President and CEO of NAFEO, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, in Washington, D.C. which oversees and advocates for resources for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) nationally.

[40:43]: She notes that people don't realize that HBCUs actually have diverse populations, just like historically white schools. These colleges have the same prestigious background as the Ivy League schools, and she noticed that many people in the Montclair school district do not get as excited about the HBCUs like Howard or Hampton University as they do for Ivy League schools. She says that by attending Oberlin, she missed out on the camaraderie, opportunities and sense of family that communities built at the HBCUs, like organizations such as fraternities, sororities. At Howard, her father was an Omega man, while her mother was a Delta Delta Sweetheart, and that's how her dad wooed his mom!

[43:48]: Dr. Baskerville talked about her neighborhood growing up. Her mother was on the Park and Recreation Commission and she petitioned the township, through the state's Green Acres program, to build Canterbury Park. When she was very young, Willowmere existed, as did Pierpont Road as a horseshoe shaped road, but there was also a horse farm, called Flint's Farm, where Canterbury Park now is. Many neighbors did not want the children to cross busy streets such as Orange Road to get to Nishuane Park or to travel far to get to Glenfield Park, the closest parks. She remembers the community being filled with love and relatives. Everyone knew each other, and that is why she raised her son in town as well. She knew everyone living on the neighboring streets – Orange Road, Pierpont, Planchet, Orange Road -- and would take care of each other. She remembers her parents had a demonstrative, loving relationship; her father sang to her mother every day as she prepared dinner. They shared chores and seemed very thrilled to be married to each other. Her parents were her role models. She wanted to be a wife and a mom, because nothing seemed more wonderful than what her parents had. Unfortunately, her dad passed away at the young age of 63.

[47:43]: The kitchen table was a discussion place to meet. The community would gather and decide what to do, and even if they disagreed, they would have a conversation. Today, she blames people wanting to go their own way, not wanting to listen and learn from others, losing the strength they previously had in numbers when they would unite behind a cause. She noted that the same problems Montclair faces today with residential developments and density, they had back when her father was on the Zoning Board of Adjustment. Dr. Baskerville argues that certain areas of the township are still off limits to development when they should not be, despite many good things that have been done over the years.

[50:40]: Returning to the topic of schools...In high school, they were still fighting for Black teachers. They had a sit-in at one point with the head of the BSU. They had wanted to fire the African American guidance counselor. They wanted people who the students can identify with, and there was a lack of African American teachers, both male and female. With the displacement in town going on, the African American community has been declining. The high end developments are displacing people of lower socio-economic means. Multiple transit hubs were put on the table for high density development, including Walnut Street, Bay Street and Bellevue Street stations; residents near Bellevue Avenue station complained and that development was taken off the table. Bay Street station had a historically Italian neighborhood near Pine Street and African American. The developers have been able to negotiate the 20% affordable housing ordinance down to only 10% affordable housing. Many areas in the Fourth Ward that previously

did not attract developers are now desired for transit access, such as the Fourth Ward. She has been trying to find a way to help make sure people are not displaced, even before she became a Councilwoman.

[59:10]: Dr. Baskerville recalls her immediate neighborhood when she was growing up. She currently lives very near the house she grew up in. They would walk through the South End Business District on the way to Nishuane School. The business district was thriving, with an Acme, a Schweppes candy store/news stand, the South End Hardware store, a bakery, a meat market, a hair salon and more. They all knew the owners, as they would always walk to school. They would walk with kids in their neighborhood, even the distance from Canterbury Park to the high school. In most families in the neighborhood, both parents worked, so when children got home from school their parents were typically not home. She spent time at the local Y that served as a babysitter. They also played outside; when the streetlights came on, you would head home. She saw them build Canterbury Park right in the center of her neighborhood, and would spend her days running, playing sports or building treehouses in the woods behind the park. They would also build go-karts from whatever materials they could find; everyone had one. She took ice skating lessons at the Essex Rink. She recalls an era before technology and notes all the NAACP records from her father's time leading the organization were typed on a typewriter; from her room she would hear him in the room below if he was typing something, "click, click, click, click." Today, parents give their kids technology very young to act as babysitters instead of signing them up for activities. She feels that technology is abused, and people are able to hide behind devices as opposed to meeting face to face.

[1:05:26]: The South End was predominantly African American when she grew up. There were one or two Italian families, but most of the Italians on Pine Street, but had begun to move out in the 1950s. They went to their own church and had their own organizations. The South End goes from the South End Shopping district to Nishuane School, and she notes that people confuse Fourth Ward and South End. At one time there were four Baskerville homes near Canterbury Park, and she describes it as one of the best kept secrets in the town. It is a beautiful park, with beautiful cherry blossoms, and it's safe and quiet. The homes in the area were less expensive for comparable ones in more expensive neighborhoods, and started to get the attention of homebuyers not traditionally from that neighborhood, she noticed as she was raising her son there.

[1:08:05]: Her mom was an educator and assistant principal, her dad was the first African American advertiser for a prestigious advertising agency, NJ Ayre (sp?) in New York City. They did not have a lot of money for shopping, so mostly went to local, second-hand stores – the Barter Box? They never went for name brand clothes. Her father saved rigorously for college. They would go to the mall and ice skate, she was a cheerleader so she had the uniforms and such, and they had everything they needed. They had nice vacations at Cape Cod. She remembers her father saying to "get what you need"; they didn't need the latest name brand. They had more fun shopping for food for the neighborhood gatherings. Her mom loved to cook, and she could cook anything. She does not remember going to the Acme, as her family went to the ShopRite in East Orange, usually.

[1:12:15]: Dr. Baskerville was asked if she recalled facing discrimination when she was growing up. She said she saw plenty of discrimination as a child, and still does today. She says that there is a choice to make, to process and acknowledge it and to take action, and to move past it. Her

cheerleading advisor, an African American woman, told her that she could not cheer unless she got rid of her afro. She had wanted to express herself, and it had become very important to her to understand her African American roots. Growing up in the Unitarian Church she had friends of all racial backgrounds. She talks about kids mingling with other races until they get to the high school and then you see a division between the races, and she wonders why. In high school, while trying to understand her roots, she had wanted to express her African heritage and culture. When she wanted to wear an afro and wear traditional African clothes, many of her white friends' parents were not as welcoming.

[1:16:45]: These episodes of racism taught her that African roots were not welcome in parts of the white community. This was around high school. At high school, she was an athlete and a cheerleader and was involved with the Black Student Union. It upset her because people began to judge her for her clothing, hair and skin color as opposed to her personality. At UMDNJ, she was struggling with studying (after accelerating both her high school and undergrad years) and had to go before a group 15-20 white administrators -- men in suits. They had wanted to expel her, as she had performed poorly on tests. Her anatomy professor, Dr. Fazzano, saw her perform excellently in the anatomy lab, even teach her fellow classmates, but do poorly on exams. Dr. Fazzano spoke up for her and made them all go into the lab for Dr. Baskerville to answer all their questions, which she did. Dr. Fazzano and Dr. Baskerville convinced the board that she could remain enrolled.

[1:20:58]: In closing, she reiterates that one of the most important things is that people do not get weary and complacent. People should always be lifting the bar to challenge and improve the town. Montclair is an awesome place, but people should not be afraid to speak out if they have a different opinion. She notes the bullying, selfishness, and meanness prevalent in society and politics currently, but urges people to instead work together, listen and collaborate in a non-violent way. She feels that kids cannot be kids, there are so many weapons now and differences escalate to violence. She feels that they need to undo the stigma around mental illness and recognize all illnesses as illness that should be treated as such. Help people understand how the brain works and the medical issues, and get people help quickly. She advocates for more sensible gun laws; everyone carrying a gun should have a mental fitness test annually. In New Jersey, she has to pay \$100 a year just to have an M.D. license. She feels that annual charges for gun possession will help reduce the number of guns, as would yearly checks to prove mental fitness to possess a gun. She wants to take the streets back to let kids be kids again to play outside, that children are afraid of intruders, and that they have to hold evacuation drills. It reminds her of the air raid drills she remembers when she was at Nishuane.

[1:27:43]: Throughout the generations, it was often the young people who led reforms. They should all work together, and they all need to listen to each other. Age does not matter, what is important is coming up with common sense rules. She loves Larry Hamm, who started People's Organization for Progress, who has been out on the street corners with his bull horn consistently forever to advocate for justice, jobs, unity, equal pay, justice and more. She talks of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and we are still fighting for some of the same things he was fighting for. You should always join a group you are passionate about, and speak out and be willing to listen. Even if you're not passionate about civil rights, be willing to listen, and then share what you're passionate about. She urges us to put down our devices and become activists about SOMETHING, as silence and doing nothing will be our demise.

