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A 'snapshot' of D.C.'s segregated past comes to light in a roundabout way



John Kelly's Washington

The answer to a question that has bedeviled some Washington history lovers for years finally came in an unexpected place: in front of a handsome art deco-style house in Northwest Washington. The question was: What's the story behind the Association of Oldest Inhabitants (Colored) Inc.?

The group of leading black District citizens — founded in 1914 — was modeled on the Association of Oldest Inhabitants (AOI), a white group that was founded in 1865 and is probably the oldest civic organization in the city. As was the norm in those racially segregated days, the two groups were separate, but they occasionally came together for common ends. In 1919, they held a joint meeting to commemorate District residents — black and white — who served in World War I.

Two years ago, Nelson Rimensnyder, historian for AOI, made a plea in my column for information on AOI (Colored). He knew the group had existed and felt certain someone out there must have documents related to it.

And then James M. Goode stood in front of 2915 University Terr. NW, in Washington's University Park neighborhood. James is a historian, the author of such must-have D.C. reference works as "Washington Sculpture" and "Best Addresses." He's working on a book about historic houses in Washington, and the University Terrace house will be in it. It's a gem: Light-colored brick is arranged in curved sections, and one round exterior wall is clad in glass block.



BILL BROWN/THE WASHINGTON POST

This house on University Terrace NW was designed by William Nixon, who from 1942 to 1962 was president of the Association of Oldest Inhabitants (Colored) Inc.

The 1951 house was designed by a man named William D. Nixon, and when James spoke with the current owners, he learned that one of Nixon's granddaughters lives in Silver Spring.

And so he went to meet that granddaughter, Delores Mounsey, who grew up in the University Terrace house. Nixon designed it for his daughter Ethel (Delores's mother), a psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

As James flipped through family scrapbooks looking for information on the house, he found something else: page after page relating to Nixon's involvement with AOI (Colored). Nixon was president of the organization from 1942 until shortly before his death at age 91 in 1962.

"It was really extraordinary," James



JOHN KELLY/THE WASHINGTON POST

Granddaughter Delores Mounsey had preserved William Nixon's scrapbooks.



COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

William Nixon taught art and put his skills to work in various media.

said of his serendipitous discovery.

Delores has donated three scrapbooks to the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.

"It's really a snapshot of black upper-middle-class life during this time period in Washington, D.C.," said Ida Jones, curator in the center's manuscript division. "It will be a nice planet in our universe."

William Nixon was an interesting man. He was born in 1871 and graduated from D.C.'s Miner Normal School in 1891. He never attended a four-year college. It's unclear how he developed his design skill — whether it was something he was born with or something he learned — but Nixon eventually became an art teacher in District public high schools, retiring as

co-director of art at Dunbar.

He put his artistic skills to use in all manner of media. He designed the packaging for a patent medicine called Harris' New Blood Tonic. (The logo showed a rabbit jumping through a hoop, an illustration, perhaps, of how rejuvenating the tonic was.) He painted landscapes and designed stage sets. He arranged tableaus, those ornate, living recreations of classical scenes so beloved in the 1920s. He hand-carved at least one piece of furniture. (Delores has the intricately detailed wooden chair.) And he designed three houses and a commercial building.

Of his sinuous University Terrace house, Delores remembered her grandfather saying, "Anybody can draw a straight line."

Nixon used his position with AOI to fight for the integration of the District's police and fire departments. His obituary in the Afro-American noted that he took a personal interest in the case of Carl and Anne Braden, a white activist couple who were charged with sedition for helping a black family buy a home in a segregated Louisville neighborhood. Nixon helped raise funds for the Bradens' defense.

Bill Brown, president of today's AOI, is delighted that Nixon's scrapbooks will be available for research. "Our point always was, this stuff has got to be out there someplace," he said. "Let's have it not end up in the dumpster of history."

There was never any danger of that, Delores said. "I kept my grandfather's scrapbooks because he put them together," she said, "and it was our family."

What history is in your family's scrapbooks?

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Dr. Gridlock

Excerpted from washingtonpost.com/drgridlock

'Alight'? How about just 'Exit'?

Kathryn Catania of Northwest Washington looked up at a Metrobus sign at Seventh Street and Constitution Avenue NW, near the National Gallery of Art, and didn't get it.

The brand-new sign read, "Alight Only."

She wrote to us to say she was "dumbfounded" by the phrasing and thought other riders might be as well.

In an e-mail, Catania, who calls herself a Metro rider and advocate for plain language, wrote, "I thought to myself what does alight mean?"

She said she recalled using the word in a college poetry class, "usually in connection with birds landing on something."

Using her phone, she said, she found the word in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary. The entry defined alight this way: "intransitive verb

"1. to come down from something (as a vehicle) . . .

"2. to descend from or as if from the air and come to rest . . .

"3. archaic: to come by chance."

Catania said she assumes that Metro is using the first definition, although she remarked that "we all know sometimes Metrobus does come by chance instead of by schedule."

Catania wondered why the sign doesn't say, "Exit Only for X, Y, Z routes," instead of, "Alight Only."



DANA HEDGPETH/THE WASHINGTON POST

A Metrobus rider wonders why the signs don't use plainer language.

"Bus riders shouldn't have to look up the language on the bus sign to decipher what it says," she wrote.

The sign at Seventh and Constitution seems to indicate that "Alight Only" or exit only, applies to express routes P17, P19 and W13. Dan Stessel, Metro's chief spokesman, said the sign means that passengers on those routes can "discharge" at the stop but that the bus won't "accept new passengers" for those routes there.

As to why the sign goes on to read, "16F 32 36 54 74 Only," he said at first that it was "clearly a mistake."

But he wrote in a later e-mail, "upon further research, it appears that the sign [the new sign] replaced contained the word 'only' as well." Bus officials, he said,

believe that "there are so many routes that pass the location without stopping . . . the word 'only' was added at some point to reduce confusion" by indicating those bus routes that do take on passengers there.

The sign conforms to Metro's "new sign standard," Stessel said. The new signs are bigger with larger type, and they comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Metro has installed 500 of the new signs and says it will take three years to install them at all of Metro's 11,000 bus stops throughout the region under a \$2.5 million effort that includes new poles and information in Braille.

How many use the word "alight"? Stessel wrote, "We don't have a count on this."

And why use the word "alight" on bus signs? Stessel responded in his e-mail that it is "a word and a fairly common one at that." He went on to say: "The current sign system is the result of a regional collaboration with bus stop coordinators throughout the region. The other operators in the region also use the term 'alighting.' . . . It is not just a colloquial phrase of Metro."

Catania spotted another bus stop sign that used the word "alight" at Massachusetts Avenue and First Street NE, across from the National Postal Museum. It reads, "97 D8 X8 Layover Alighting Only."

She said transit officials should spend some time at www.plainlanguage.gov.

"Maybe then Metro will see that clear communication is essential for helping customers accomplish their top tasks," she wrote. "In this case, something as simple as catching a bus."

— Dana Hedgpeth

Kevin Chavous the Younger has to run an unusual campaign



Mike DeBonis

Your average political campaign can be extinguished for a lot less than the candidate's arrest for allegedly soliciting prostitution.

So let it be known Kevin Bass Chavous is not running your average political campaign.

He hasn't been since

Dec. 16, when news broke that he was arrested by D.C. police for allegedly propositioning an undercover officer. The news threw his five-month-old campaign to unseat D.C. Council member Yvette M. Alexander (D-Ward 7) into turmoil, just as Chavous, 27, looked to be picking up momentum.

And yet here he is on a recent Thursday afternoon, knocking on doors along Texas Avenue SE, scrapping for votes in the brick duplexes on the edge of Fort Dupont Park.

"We have the least-active council member in the city," he tells one senior citizen.

"I'm going to be more active, more involved," he says to another.

"I have the energy to keep the momentum going" is another favorite line.

There's some good news: Of the half-dozen residents he finds at home, three of them know his name, which he shares with his father — Kevin P. Chavous, the former three-term Ward 7 council member whose footsteps Kevin B. is looking to follow in.

"I can see the resemblance," one says.

There's some better news: None of them know about, or at least are too polite to mention, the recent headlines concerning the good-looking, well-dressed young man standing on their stoop. Nothing about the arrest. Nothing about the \$20 that police say he agreed to pay for oral sex. That's a good thing, because Chavous isn't offering much in the way of explanation for what happened on the unit block of K Street NE that night.

Chavous entered into a deferred-prosecution agreement last month under which the charges against him will be dropped so long as he agrees to avoid the vicinity of his arrest and perform community service.

Until then, Chavous says, his attorney has advised him to avoid discussing the specifics of the arrest except to say this: "It was a misunderstanding that was unfortunate."

What's doubly unfortunate is that he won't be free and clear until mid-April — weeks after the Democratic primary. Until then, he's left to counter the snickers and innuendo with platitudes like this: "I knew in my heart I did nothing wrong or illegal." They have

their account of the story, and when the time comes, I will tell mine." "It doesn't change the fact people are woefully disappointed with their current leadership."

Nice pivot. With swaths of the ward dissatisfied with Alexander, Chavous recognizes that this might be his best chance in years to reclaim the seat his father lost in 2004 to a political novice named Vincent C. Gray. He's trying to distinguish himself in a crowded primary with promises of leveraging his youth and energy to address constituent concerns, with a sprinkling of the school reform dogma his father now promotes full time. (For instance, Chavous's first bill would institute a "parent trigger" — a controversial provision that would allow parents at a failing public school to demand changes, including conversion to a charter school.)

And watching him press the flesh on the hustings makes it clear that Chavous the Younger has the same raw

CHRIS L. JENKINS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Kevin B. Chavous is hoping his work ethic, not his arrest, will set him apart from other Ward 7 challengers.

political talent that once made Chavous the Elder a leading mayoral prospect. His resume is thinnish for a wannabe council member — Howard, Howard Law, student law clerk at the AARP, then an executive for the Black Alliance for Educational Options, a pro-school-choice group whose board his father chairs. But he's worked hard since he launched his run in July, planting a thousand yard signs and going stoop to stoop to decry the "inadequate representation" he says the ward is receiving.

Chavous is hoping his work ethic will both set him apart from his fellow challengers — including the Rev. William Bennett, Tom Brown, Dorothy Douglas and Monica L. Johnson — and help him get past his run-in with authorities.

"No one else is going to knock on your door, so remember that," Chavous tells Leroy Hoskins of D Street SE.

"I'm going to keep you in mind," Hoskins said.

All he can ask for, really.

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Campus Overload

Excerpted from washingtonpost.com/campusoverload

Love's death prompted U-Va. police changes

Soon after University of Virginia lacrosse player Yeadley Love was found dead in her apartment in May 2010 and her ex-boyfriend George Huguely V was charged in her death, University of Virginia police officer Angela Tabler received a new assignment.

Instead of writing parking tickets and directing traffic, Tabler has the full-time job of educating students, faculty and staff about domestic and dating violence, alcohol abuse and the help available from university police in times of trouble.

Tabler also is in charge of assisting students who are the victims of crime by explaining their options, connecting them with resources, helping them obtain protective orders, holding their hands through the often intimidating court process and frequent phone contacts.

"I look at the community a little

differently now," Tabler said. "People will say to me, 'Are you the same officer?' I'm not."

Tabler's job is one of many U-Va. changes prompted by Love's death. The university sponsored a "Day of Dialogue" in September 2010 to discuss dating violence, safety and changes needed in campus culture.

Several student leaders say Love's death and other incidents at U-Va. have prompted frank talks about such tough issues as dating violence, alcoholism and mental health problems.

"My generation, my age is still plagued by that feeling of being invincible," said Pemberton Heath, 21, a fourth-year student from North Carolina who helps lead discussions among students, faculty and staff about improving U-Va.'s culture. "I think the events of spring 2010 reminded us of the fragility of life."

The number of those conversations has probably increased this week.

Huguely appeared in a Charlottesville courtroom Monday for what is expected to be a two-week trial.

Tabler fields dozens of calls — some in the middle of the night — from students worried about a friend or about themselves. Students are also referred to her from other departments on campus.

"There has been a jump in calls," she said. "We get a lot of people who call and say, 'I'm not sure if this is something. . . . We would rather them call and not need us than to not call.'"

To Tabler, the increase in calls means that the training sessions and outreach efforts are working. She and others have provided training at student orientations, handed out fliers at events, visited sorority and fraternity houses and met with residence hall assistants, among other things. She estimates that the police department reached 18,600 people last year.

The message conveyed through many of these contacts: Don't stand by and do nothing if you or someone you know is in any sort of trouble. It's a message that's repeated "over and over and over again," Tabler said. "We want them to know that it's okay to talk to the police."

— Jenna Johnson

THE DAILY QUIZ

How many cupcakes did Alexandria Cupcake proprietor Adnan Hamidi bring to The Washington Post for a photo shoot?

(Hint: Find the answer in the Food section.)
EARN 5 POINTS: Find the answer, then go to washingtonpost.com/postpoints and click on "Quizzes" to enter the correct response.



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