

**Progressive Democrats of Benicia**  
**Black History Month program, Feb. 11, 2019**

**Some Benicia History for Black History Month**  
**By Novanna E. Hunt**

Black History month is a time to recognize and remember great deeds, people and accomplishments in the history of African Americans. We have a bit of interesting and unheralded Black History right here in Benicia.

I live on Carolina Drive which was once an all African American community. How did Carolina Drive become a black community? The homes were built in 1954. As the story goes the original developer fell into financial trouble and needed to sell the homes quickly. He sold his first home to an African American family. After that, he couldn't sell to anyone but African Americans. The older homes in nearby West Manor had restrictive covenants that prohibited the sale of homes in that development to African Americans. Remember, that in the early 50's it was tough for a Black couple to qualify for a home loan. They had to have a significant down payment, be gainfully employed at stable jobs, have stellar credit and often references from a white person.

My mother first purchased a home on Carolina Drive in the mid-1960s. My husband and I purchased the home in 1971. I believe it is time to dispel the myths and the prevailing warped perceptions about this neighborhood of 41 homes located just off Military and West Seventh Street. As a fifty-year resident, I can tell you that historically this was a close-knit community of African American families. It once was pretty much the only place Black people lived in Benicia. The residents were employed homeowners with hopes and dreams for themselves and their children. Some were the founders of King Solomon Church, Benicia's only primarily African American church. It was a genuine community. The children formed lifelong friendships that remain intact today. On Superbowl Sunday my son joined the young men, who are now anywhere from 40 to 55 years old, for their 35th annual Superbowl Party. Most of the early families produced one or more college graduates and many gainfully employed, upstanding, contributing citizens. Some became police officers, firemen, civil servants, officers of the court, engineers, doctors, pastors, entrepreneurs, coaches and teachers. Like any community in America, there was a small number who did not do well and yes, some who chose the criminal life.

Over the years the original owners passed away, and the homes changed hands. A few of the original families are still living there. Today we are a more ethnically diverse community. We are taxpaying homeowners with the same hopes and dreams for our families as the original owners had. We are very grateful for our magnificent view of the straits, both bridges, downtown Benicia and Mt. Diablo. We have jobs, we educate our children, we are retirees, and we are grandparents joyfully embracing our role.

Carolina Drive was called Blackberry Hill; some say because of the wild blackberry patch at the bottom of the hill, but some say otherwise. My mother once worked as a dispatcher for the Benicia police department, and she knew what the police called it. It is distressing that so many in the Benicia community have warped perceptions of Black people and communities of color. Many are biased, bigoted and uninformed.

In a recent conversation with my children, we reminisced about the advantages of growing up in this community. This was a Black neighborhood that flourished as a community within a community. Yet in the broader community, the children had the advantages of small-town life and a good school system.

There was the “village” that raised its children. Elders looked out for all the youngsters. When someone passed away, the neighbors quickly gathered around, took up a collection to help with expenses and brought food to the family. One misbehaving child was reprimanded by more than one neighborhood elder. The fathers came home from work and coached Little League and were church deacons and community volunteers. Mothers, some of whom worked outside of the home, coached softball and volunteered at the schools and in the community. There was no violence or significant criminal activity.

At the same time, the families dealt with racist teachers, police, and townspeople. Teachers who assumed the African American children were culturally deprived, couldn’t succeed and had parents who were ignorant. Police officers who stopped Black residents for no apparent reason and who, when approached by potential home buyers, advised them not to buy on Carolina Drive. In 1998, after one home was found to be structurally unsafe, the mayor declared the homes in the neighborhood had experienced structural problems over the years, leading townspeople to believe all homes in the area were in a general state of disrepair. He failed to note that banks in town initially wouldn’t finance a home improvement loan on the properties and that most of the properties were well cared for and maintained.

In about the third or fourth grade, my daughter came home from school one day and announced that she was in a special reading group. I was stunned and curious. This was a child who loved to read. Her treat every other Friday for years was to spend the evening at the Vallejo library with Mom. When I questioned the teacher, she told me she had created this group for the culturally deprived students who didn’t have books in their homes. “Culturally deprived” I wondered. Our house was full of books, art, music, and information. What did she mean by “culture?” The teacher had not tested the reading skills of any of the children and after I demanded they be tested the tests proved that not one of the African American students belonged in a special reading group. Coincidentally, the group was comprised of all African Americans living on Carolina Drive and the teacher had not made a home visit to one of them.

History surrounds us. African American history is American history. Knowledge of our past helps to inform the decisions we make today and for the future. In the words of Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the Black history celebration, “You must give your own story to the world.”