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### Oral History: Susan Rosenberg

For my Asbury Park oral history project I interviewed Susan Rosenberg. Susan Rosenberg is a retired librarian from Asbury Park and is currently a part of the Asbury Park historical society. Rosenberg was not born in Asbury Park, she moved there when she was 3 years old “when an apartment became available”. She was born in the Bronx, New York on February 14, 1946. She lived in that apartment for 4 years until her parents purchased the house that she inherited. Rosenberg said that when she was in elementary school, she remembers that there were no African-American students in any of her classes. Asbury was heavily segregated until she was in high school. African-Americans lived on the west side of Asbury Park and had separate schools. When Rosenberg was in high school, there were African-Americans in her classes and she said they were “wonderful”. She also said that they tended to keep to themselves and their own groups, but that’s expected when going to a school with old friends.

When the riots happened in 1970, Rosenberg was on her way home from college and on her way to her job as an academic librarian. She said that she remembers driving to work and seeing the smoke over the town and the flames from the riots. It was 12-15 miles away from Asbury Park and she could see the smoke in the sky. She stayed at her academic librarian position for 41 years. I then asked her why she volunteers with the Asbury Park historical society and she explained her passion for what she does. When she retired for some reason, she gravitated to Asbury Park and started to volunteer for the society. When she met some of the

board members, they told her they were trying to get registered for the state and national historical buildings and she wanted to help. She thought she “would lend [her skills] to the situation”. She did research and was able to get the recognition. Her favorite piece of Asbury Park was when she was younger and Asbury Park was more of a recreational town than a residential town. She described how she loved the amusements and the rides and when her family would come visit. After her childhood, the city became run down and abandoned. The times were not good until music became an important part of the culture in Asbury Park. Asbury Park developed its own genre and had a large influence on rock.

Compared to the past, Asbury Park is a completely different town today. It is still a work in progress and there are still many problems, a big thing that has changed is the racism that was heavily present. She said that Asbury Park is “a microcosm of events going on in the world”. People are more aware of social issues and are conscious in Asbury to try to change. There is still a West and East divide in the town and the West is noticeably not as pleasant as the East side. There’s government housing, but there are no parks or places to walk. Private developers are building condos on condos and Rosenberg feels that it drops the value of the town. She believes that they should be investing in parks and places for recreation. The building of the condos sacrifices the recreation of the town. The town is also becoming more “sophisticated” in its recreation and being geared more towards adults than children. There are no rides and amusements, but there are plenty of nice restaurants, shops, and bars all over. The parks are one of her favorite parts and are a draw to the town. Unfortunately, there are still parts of town like the iconic casino that are abandoned and not taken care of. She recalled a time when Ringo Starr was going to come perform and the concert had to be canceled. Aside from the abandoned buildings, she said that there is a big art scene that has come up recently in Asbury Park. The

entertainment and recreation has come a long way and it is still a “burgeoning city that has yet to be completed”.

The first significant change she could think of was in 1995. It “was the last straw and [Asbury Park] had to go up from there”. The boardwalk was redone, properties were fixed, abandoned buildings were gotten rid of. She was not following politics closely because of her career but that is when she remembers any change happening. In 1995, Asbury Park wanted to demolish the house of Steven Crane and a couple bought the house that had squatters in it, and renovated the house for various cultural events and traditions. That is what started the cultural change in Asbury Park and sparked the citizens to want to take care of their town and its history.

The riots that happened in 1970 are a part of history and do not ruin the reputation or brand of Asbury Park. There are other amazing things about Asbury park that Rosenberg mentions, like Bruce Springsteen. People have come here from all over the world to see him and he has put the city on international notice. When I asked if Springsteen helps promote or hinder the cities past, she replied with “thank goodness for him”. This shows the importance of Springsteen and how the musical culture of Asbury is a large factor that helped bring necessary change. He has done so much for Asbury Park and is the reason they have an international reputation.

The construction of the turnpike and influx of people in Asbury did not help change any segregation. Rosenberg said that people had to be “on the inside” to see what was really happening in Asbury Park and to notice that the town was segregated into 2 separate sides. People were not very aware until the riots, which affected business heavily. Now, business is back and booming and the LGBT community helped revitalize Asbury Park. The last straw for African Americans to riot was the fact that they could not even go on the beach. They had their

own beach, but it was a tiny sliver for a certain time of day. They were not allowed in restaurants and public pools and they held meetings to understand what was being done to them. The African-Americans had enough and decided it was time for a change, leading to the riots. Asbury Park was segregated when it was established and there are still remnants of segregation. After the riots, the city went very downhill until it went uphill.

Rosenberg's family lost their town and their recreation when the city was destroyed and it caused people like her and her family to go to other places to have fun. The city was "a place not to go to anymore". The riots were a big part of history and there were riots at the same time all over the country. She saw the riots in Michigan and Newark and it was very popular all over the country. The rebuilding of the town did not really happen until the 21st century because of the economic struggles. A private developer tried to make a hotel, went bankrupt half way through, and left a giant abandoned steel structure that loomed over the city. It was symbolic of Asbury Park, and it was a ruin for something that was never built. Unfortunately, there are still racial biases and issues, but that unfortunately is all around the country. Asbury Park is a very diverse town and she said that people love the diversity when they come to Asbury Park. Rosenberg thinks Asbury Park is "paramount" to its South Jersey rivals because of the rich culture and music and it is surpassing them as the place to go on the Jersey Shore. She is extremely proud of the town and is happy that it is on the rise again.