VOICES FROM A GHETTO

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Publisher’s Note

This book is a real-time chronicle of Boston’s majority Black neighborhoods in the 1960s, as told by people who were living in, working in, and advocating for those neighborhoods. Researched and written between 1964 and 1969, it was intended to contribute to that decade’s fast-growing body of literature about the systemic injustice crippling Black families across the country. The Civil Rights Movement had been gaining momentum, and a new crop of books, articles, and broadcasts had begun to explore what it meant to be Black in America in the 20th century.

Although *Voices from a Ghetto* was accepted by a New York literary agent, it never found a publisher. The full manuscript and the accompanying notes, tapes, and transcripts were boxed up and followed their author from home to home and from state to state for the next six decades.

But while the type on the pages faded, the voices remained strong.

Published for the first time in 2025, this collection serves as a remarkable time capsule. The voices of nearly thirty interviewees — residents, activists, and public officials among them — are supported by data from state and federal agency reports, journal articles, Congressional testimony, and more than a dozen additional background interviews. The resulting book — which is largely unaltered, apart from a few factual corrections and the addition of an afterword and an author biography — paints a sobering picture of a city rife with unsafe homes, unequal educational and employment opportunities, and unrealized expectations. There is despair in these pages, and anger, and exhaustion, but at the same time there is humor, and strength, and hope.

There is also an unsettling and infuriating familiarity. Sixty years later, Boston remains one of the most segregated cities in the country. Two-thirds of the city’s Black residents live in three of its twenty-three neighborhoods — Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan. Black tenants continue to face obstacles ranging from housing discrimination to unwarranted evictions, and a 2025

audit of Boston Housing Authority apartments found the same kinds of health and safety violations that were prevalent in the mid-1960s.

But there are victories, too. A Black-led tenant group in Mattapan successfully lobbied for conversion of a 347-unit apartment complex to affordable housing. In Roxbury and North Dorchester, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has earned national attention for protecting affordability and ensuring "development without displacement." And a major effort is underway to redevelop Roxbury's Nubian Square (formerly Dudley Square) into a commercial hub.

The first interview in the book, "Escape Velocity," captures the tensions inherent in this ongoing struggle for justice:

> *We've got a long way to go and it sure doesn't encourage me one bit. Of course you can't lose all hope either; you* have *to keep hoping that things will work out.*

The people profiled in these pages held onto that sense of hope. Most spent the rest of their lives working toward a fairer, kinder, more sensible world. May this book inspire its readers to do the same.

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal.

. . . Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.

. . . To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.

. . . What white Americans have never fully understood — but what the Negro can never forget — is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."

— *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1968*

One-third of the children live in fatherless homes.

Seventy-two percent of them attend racially imbalanced schools, and in twenty-six of these schools the black enrollment is over ninety percent.

Fully half the housing is defective by US Census standards.

The unemployment rate is seven percent; the rate of underemployment is twenty-four percent.

* * *

This ghetto is Boston's, but its problems are the nation's; for the same ingredients are simmering in all our cities, differing only in degree.

Yet despite the increasing turbulence, many white citizens continue to insulate themselves from urban wretchedness. Denying prejudice, they still remain basically aloof and uncommitted to change, mouthing familiar euphemisms: "the Negro problem," "the culturally disadvantaged," "crime-in-the-streets," and lately "lawandorder."

Among those who cry for anti-riot legislation and property protection, how many have been as vociferous in demanding the enforcement of fair housing laws and equal employment practices? How many really understand — or really care — how it feels to be constantly reminded, with gouges both blatant and subtle, that you are considered at worst inferior, at best "different"; and that the future of your children may be equally bleak?

So black citizens become increasingly militant, through despair, through disillusionment, through frustration. Traditional approaches have failed; the status quo is unacceptable; innovation therefore becomes essential. If whites will not act from empathy or morality, perhaps they may from fear.

The breach widens.

Boston's ghetto includes the South End, Roxbury, parts of North Dorchester, and the fringes of Dorchester, Mattapan, and Jamaica Plain. At its closest point it is little more than a mile from Beacon Hill and the downtown business district. Roughly crescent-shaped, it has been nicknamed "the black boomerang" and the implications are more than geographic.

Early in 1968 a group called CAUSE (Community Assembly for a Unified South End) made headlines for several days in a protest against the Boston Redevelopment Authority's renewal plan for the area: the insufficient number of low-income units proposed, the inadequate provisions for family relocation, the lack of community representation on the planning committee. For almost a year CAUSE had tried every standard protest method: meetings, letters, picketing, court action. Unheeded, they finally got immediate results by occupying the BRA's district office and refusing to admit city officials, including newly elected Mayor Kevin White.

The mayor, a liberal who in the first months of his administration had coped successfully with several potentially disruptive situations, and whose relationship with various ghetto factions had seemed promising, was upset and apparently bewildered by the demonstration: "I've talked and I've listened and I have tried to act. I haven't solved all the problems but I've tried to have honest relationships. I haven't been in office long enough to do all these things."

The mayor's defense was accurate; but to those in immediate need of housing, and to all who had fought these battles for so many years, it must have seemed an irrelevant response. For them, the time for patience has ended. The tragic irony is that in Boston, and in our other cities, white concern may come too late.

For the people who speak in the following pages, the problems of Roxbury are omnipresent. All are black; all but three live in the ghetto; and all are concerned with the oppressive realities of poor housing, underemployment, antiquated school buildings and overcrowded classrooms.

They are unimpressed with the interminable rhetoric of white liberals. As one of them points out, "I've been a Negro all my life, I've been

in a minority group all my life . . . and at this point I don't think we have any more time to play with the intangibles. . . . All this emotional energy and drive . . . has got to start manifesting itself in material terms. . . ."

To all of them, I am immensely grateful for sharing these accounts of their struggles and frustrations in the long battle against white discrimination, intransigence, and apathy. For errors, inaccuracies, or ambiguities the responsibility is mine; otherwise the book belongs to them.

Semantic Note:

The interview excerpts that follow were taped during a period of several years, from the summer of 1964 to the summer of 1968. The word "Negro" is used with some frequency by people who would now say "black." I have not made the substitution, simply because I have made no changes from the original transcripts.

In my own notes I have used the word "black" out of deference to the preference of many black people, and with the feeling that the tangible problems of the ghetto are too crucial to be submerged in semantic quibbles.

“To bridge the gap”

*Roxbury experienced a double victory in the 1967 municipal elections: Louise Day Hicks was defeated for mayor, and **Thomas Atkins** was elected to the nine-man City Council, becoming the first black councilman since 1950. Atkins’s platform stressed the need to make city government more responsive to the people. He promised to work for improved housing programs, including neighborhood control of urban renewal projects; equalization of tax assessments; improved street cleaning and maintenance; higher police standards and salaries; jobs, recreation and other programs for youth; and enforcement and modernization of housing, building, fire and health codes.*

Mr. Atkins was formerly executive secretary and vice-president of the Boston NAACP, and chairman of its Housing Committee. He is a member of the Governor’s Advisory Committee on Civil Rights, and a 1969 graduate of Harvard Law School.

* * *

People who have been either unaccustomed or unwilling in the past to become involved with the Negro community — when, for whatever reason, they decide to become involved, their involvement is a reticent, hesitant, partial involvement. And as a result, the program is stillborn from the beginning. It’s almost a foregone conclusion that it’ll die.

This has been true with employers that have tried to open up the doors, to hire Negroes, as a result of complaints or pressure. And then three weeks

later they complain because no Negroes have come in. This company might have a history of forty or fifty years of discrimination. All of a sudden they expect us to forget it. They expect people all of a sudden to disregard the non-credibility of newspaper advertisements as far as employment is concerned; to disregard the rumors and supporting network of lies and whatnot that have grown up inside a community about a particular industry, a particular type of job, a particular geographic location of the city. They don't take this into account. As a result, efforts that are in many cases well-intentioned yield no results whatsoever.

And this is a very serious problem. It is one that has not fully been dealt with by the civil rights organizations. It is one that certainly hasn't been touched by the agencies or businesses that express an interest now in making available opportunities that were previously non-existent. It is going to take a lot more than the mere publication of such a program, it will take some very active follow-up. Like contacting people. If a bank sets up a new checking account system, they do more than put a sign in the window. If a bank sets up a new subsidiary somewhere, they hammer it. They use all the techniques of advanced advertising, they get all the Madison Avenue brains going, and they go about it professionally. And it is going to require similar concerted efforts to bridge the gap which now exists.

. . . The housing lobbies are very, very powerful. They have sought protection and gained it in many quarters.

[CORE and the NAACP set up Housing Bureaus] for the specific purpose of receiving and compiling complaints on housing conditions. All of these were submitted to the ONI[1] and the processing has been remarkably efficient for a city agency. The reason is that the city was faced with the possibility of numerous and prolonged rent strikes; things that had up to that point been "impossible" suddenly became desirable.[2]

Some of the things people turned in were violations but not actionable ones, not ones that the city would really do anything about. The major ones, such as wiring, door locks, plumbing, fire hazards, safety hazards, these things went on a report. ONI went and investigated each one of them, gave a sheet

to the person who owned the building, detailing the various violations that existed, and demanding that improvements be made and giving them some sort of reasonable period of time to make these improvements. They would go back for reinspection; where compliance was forthcoming there was no problem. Where compliance was not forthcoming the usual procedure was to give another demand. If that demand was not met they would then be faced with a probable court action. Normally, at this point, the most recalcitrant landlords became agreeable.

I sent out letters to randomly selected people to find out what sort of compliance there had been, and I found that in virtually every instance ONI had made follow-ups. Compliance was being grudgingly given. I'd say the primary reason compliance was so slow, was first, the landlord didn't think he was going to be forced to do it. This was why reinvestigation was necessary. This having been done, the landlord became convinced he had to do it; then he had the problem, where was he going to get the money? Because in almost every instance, the person who owns property that becomes deteriorated and dilapidated is overextended. And it is a question of where he will get the money to make improvements that he should have made a long time ago, from a till that is already depleted — not depleted because he isn't making profits, but because he's using the profits so rapidly to make other profits. The money used in these buildings has a very, very rapid turnover.

The majority of the complaints we received were not [against] large landowners; they were for the most part small landlords.

One problem is the tendency of the large landlord to operate under the aegis of a number of straws; to set up a corporation to deal with a specific string of apartments, and set up another one to deal with another string. It gets to be very sticky.[3] They feel they can ignore the single complainant or even the complaining occupants of a given building. They are much less inclined to try to ignore an organization.

Notes

1. The Office of Neighborhood Improvement at City Hall has been functioning chiefly in non-renewal areas in an attempt to prevent the spread of blight. Until 1965 housing complaints had to be referred either to ONI or to whichever specific agency could respond to the type of violation in question — Health, Building, or Fire. There is now a Department of Housing Inspection for code enforcement and for processing of complaints. It has the authority to take court action against landlords, but seldom does so partly because the courts have tended to make light of such cases.

   In 1967, 1,690 code violations were reported to the Department. Of these, 461 went to court; but only two violators were fined, and both fines were dismissed on appeal to Superior Court. In a 1968 case involving multiple severe violations, the landlord was found guilty but was only ordered to provide a month's free tenancy as redress for the complainants.

   A special legislative committee has recommended the establishment of a separate Housing Court, with civil penalties, and power to seize rent to effect repairs. Two district judges immediately assessed the proposal as "ridiculous" and suggested it would result in "bringing in a lot of absurd cases."

2. Rent receivership legislation now makes it possible for tenants to withhold rent from a landlord, paying it instead to a receiver for use in correction of violations, which must first have been reported to and certified by the Department of Housing Inspection. However, many tenants are still unaware of this law or confused by its procedural technicalities.

3. During January 1968 a cold spell with several below-zero days brought more than one thousand complaints to City Hall from people who were existing in unheated or otherwise defective apartments. City inspectors found indoor temperatures as low as 20° with ice formations in many bathrooms. Several families had to be evacuated and moved into public housing. Criminal complaints against one landlord in Roxbury Court were defended by the statement that he had sold the property in question to another realty company; it was subsequently elicited that the defendant was in fact also the manager of the company to which he had "sold" his building.

“In unity, there is possibility”

In 1966 the graduating students of the 99%-black Campbell (now King) Junior High School sat quietly waiting to receive their diplomas. Facing them from the platform was Louise Day Hicks, who had come to deliver a commencement address, despite protests from the community and against the advice of the principal.

There was a sudden commotion in the hall and ***Rev. Virgil A. Wood****, director of Roxbury’s Blue Hill Christian Center, leaped onstage. “There’s an intruder here, get her out,” he shouted. “If this were a synagogue, would you have invited Hitler?” “Get her out, get her out,” chanted the crowd, pressing forward. The situation trembled on the brink of riot as detectives first grabbed Rev. Wood, then released him and instead escorted Mrs. Hicks to the principal’s office for safekeeping. The graduates were hastily assembled in two classrooms, where the principal handed out diplomas and urged everyone to go directly home.*

Roxbury residents later arranged a “Freedom Graduation” for the class, holding the ceremony in a church after the School Committee had refused permission for the use of a school. Charges of disturbing a public assembly were brought against Rev. Wood, then continued, then dropped; while Mrs. Hicks requested special police protection — which was denied — “as long as Virgil Wood walks a free man on the streets of Boston.”

The confrontation was Rev. Wood's most dramatic, but not his first. In 1964, shortly after coming to Boston, he cited cases of police brutality and petitioned the mayor for a civilian police review board. And in 1965 he and Mrs. Hicks had clashed over an attempt to arrange a meeting between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was planning a visit to Boston, and the School Committee, with thirteen ghetto representatives also in attendance. Mrs. Hicks demurred: it was so hard, she said, to know who the real "Negro leaders" were, but she would be glad to meet with Dr. King alone. Rev. Wood refused; and Dr. King instead met with the mayor, addressed a joint session of the Massachusetts legislature, and led a march from the ghetto to the State House on Beacon Hill.

* * *

Our program [Blue Hill Christian Center] was started in 1961 by students from Andover–Newton Theological Seminary who came into the area and discovered that within this immediate neighborhood of some thirteen thousand people, there was no Protestant ministry. The neighborhood had been primarily Irish and Jewish, so that the change sociologically meant a religious change too.

We are here first of all to offer a spiritual ministry. This is a ministry to the total man, so we started with weekday religious facets and the program expanded. We have an athletic program, basketball teams, this kind of thing. We have adult programs: one involves the kind of neighborhood improvement group which does things like political action, voter registration, education, development of community leadership, mobilization for any particular function or activity that needs to be done at a given time.

Tutoring has been one large part of our program; we hope we have been reaching the real potential dropouts. There are some cases in which it's just a matter of showing interest in the youngster and giving him encouragement,

boosting his self-confidence. The schools have been suspicious of tutoring programs; generally the teachers seem to resent it. I don't know whether they take this as a criticism of their teaching methods, but we're simply trying to supplement and to give help where they probably can't. Overcrowded classrooms, deficiencies of materials, lack of texts and this kind of common problem that exists in the slum schools. There are structural changes, radical changes that have to be made in terms of the schools. Tutoring is a stopgap measure and it's certainly not in any real sense the answer to the very poor schools here.

Quite apart from the whole evil of de facto segregation is the question of quality education itself. Here we are talking about the kind of expenditures that our School Committee just doesn't even have any remote idea of considering. We've got to improve what's already in the ghetto, and at the same time we've got to meet these needs in such a way that the pattern is not further entrenched. The real problem is not alone in terms of bright and shiny facilities but the whole attitude, the philosophy. I get from an awful lot of parents the feeling that no one is really expecting their child to benefit from this experience. Those who have tried, and are still trying, to change the situation are battling against great odds and they know it, but they still continue to try, those who are interested. A number have been victimized by a sense of frustration. I see an awful lot of parents who are trying to work within the framework of the present set-up, but there doesn't seem to be much hope even by those who are working hardest. They cite, for instance, the Home and School Association as an example of the attitude that the School Committee takes in this area. It is an arm of the school administration and the parents have very little voice. The meetings are held some in the morning, some in the afternoon — that in itself indicates that they don't have any intention of making it possible for parents to share significantly in decisions.

The pressure needs to be kept on the School Committee; we need to have the needs here that are not being met spelled out clearly. We hope that parents will be vocal; it may well be that the greatest kind of pressure that

can be brought will be by the people that are at the bottom of the grass roots. In unity, there is possibility.

I'm convinced people feel: "There's no one interested in how I feel, whether I'm clean or dirty, so why should I bother." These are people who are not motivated in terms of their own inner direction. If they can be convinced that there are people who are at work in the community, maybe you can just spark their interest and increase it as you work together.

We've conducted a few clean-up campaigns in which we've tried to say to the people of the community that there *are* certain things that we can do to deal with some of the problems in the area. In so doing, we were able to make the city face up just a bit more to its responsibility of garbage removal, things like that. We had the Department of Sanitation furnish brooms, dumpsters. We even had the director of the Office of Neighborhood Improvement, out of the mayor's office, down here on the streets sweeping with us. This is good for morale. The matter of removing junk cars off the street and things like this form some of the everyday headaches of people living in the area, and we were able to make some small assault on these. We'll continue to do this kind of thing, but here again, they're just stopgaps.[1]

We've tried simply to help people to know that there *can* be redress for their grievances. When [CORE's] rent strike was planned, we planned for the eventuality of eviction.[2] People in our groups agreed to share their homes with those who had been thrown out, if this happened. It did not happen. I think if they really cracked the whip in a few instances, it wouldn't be difficult to get housing upgraded.

This seems to be one of the neighborhoods that has gotten a large concentration of those displaced from the Washington Park area. In upper Roxbury the housing is a bit more expensive, rents higher, so that people who have less would be more prone to come into this area where the physical deterioration has been greater. I think this is why the city has tended to wait, has been very lax in its code enforcement at times — in a house that has been condemned, the landlord is allowed to do a little superficial renovating and

keep it open — simply because people have nowhere to go. There are areas within Boston in which the wall of segregation is so rigid.

We haven't had the kind of reaction to urban renewal that they've had in Charlestown,[3] possibly because so many of the people who have been involved here have not been homeowners. People in this area tend to feel that one of the constants is the inconstancy of where you live. It's such a high rate of mobility, people accept it as a way of life in an area like this. You move.

A large percentage of the people with whom we work in this neighborhood have come from the South within the last five to ten years. Usually these people have come from the rural South at that, so it's a double kind of adjustment to make. Just to move from a rural area to an urban area — it's a different kind of life, and to make that one kind of adjustment alone is something of an obstacle. Their background has been farm work, unskilled work, laboring; for most of them, there's just no market, or it's very limited.

Our kind of contribution to a neighborhood like this is to help people see that there is hope; to help people not to give up, and want to make use of the resources that are available. There's far too little available. You look at the need in all of its enormous spread and you realize that as you help one family here, you've barely touched the problem as it's broadly seen.

There is going to have to be radical help given. Sometimes programs are projected as a real answer; then you get out on specific cases, and for one reason or another the given individual is not eligible. Perhaps the kind of program that might conceivably help is not available, the thing that's being offered right now is something they don't have the aptitude or background for. If it's not the kind of thing you're interested in and you've been over once or twice, the kids don't feel there's anything much really going to happen for them, it's just a waste of time. You're not going back to capture something that's just not going to be your cup of tea.

We have placed some kids in jobs during the summer. It's helped a lot: for the first time they're having significant work experiences; some kids have worked two and three months who before had not worked more than two or three hours. They go on a job, it's dirty, it's greasy and they say, "It's not for

me"; but I think our youngsters have come to see that this can be a stepping stone for something significant. They've been willing to put up with the drudgery and dirt, the kitchen jobs. We've been able to get some youngsters on jobs through our contacts, in a limited way. Realizing that what we're doing is a drop in the bucket, we still have to do that, hoping that maybe somewhere along the line we reach the moment at which this does become important to the whole.

Our greatest appeal has been with teenagers; our program is strongest in that area and they come because a friend tells them that one kind of activity or another's being offered. They don't come directly with a problem, but their problems are met. We don't like to call ourselves a church, and we don't like to call ourselves a settlement house, but we think we should incorporate the best features of both. In everything we do we like to feel that we are dealing with the total needs of the people, whether in terms of needs that we can meet directly, or things for which we refer them to agencies. We're here to be used by the community, in a literal sense. People may come because they have a money need. At least they come at that level; if you can lead them beyond the money payment, then good casework's involved. I think there's needed some kind of program that deals with their basic feelings about life, and themselves, and their destinies.

One of the saddest things I see around here is groups of men who meet in this vicinity every day. You see about a dozen on that corner over there, probably another dozen within the block, who, with most of the doors closed for normal legitimate expression, are driven to the bar. I remember our Mothers' Group here was discussing one night the matter of — as they called it at that time — the drunks who were in their way as they came to their programs here. They felt that they should call Station 9 and have these drunks removed. The discussion proceeded at that level until one mother said, "I know one of those men out there, his family lives on my street," and went on to recount the story of this particular family. He was a man who had tried hard to carry the responsibility of a father: lack of work and things like this had added up to a burden that was too much for him, so here he

was with the others. This opened up a little compassion. Rather than saying these drunks were in the way, they began to feel here were people just like them except that a different set of circumstances had led them to this. I know several very tragic cases of alcoholism; I just hope that somewhere along the way, something can be done.[4]

In one of our workshops, we talked with our youngsters about avenues of escape. One of the comments that really seemed to speak for the group was that you don't feel you're living until you drink. I suppose that the problem of drinking among teenagers here is no different than the problem of drinking, period, except that it might be broader, it might involve more. I don't know what the percentages would be of youngsters who do, of how they come to this, and what it does to them; but I get around, speaking about our youngsters here and some of the problems they're struggling with, and I begin to discover that suburban living has its hazards, and some of the hazards I wouldn't want to trade. . . . There's a tragic quality to a life that is not significantly involved, wherever it's lived.

Whenever our youngsters go to court, we try to have a large representation from the community present, if it's possible. This says something in terms of the community's interest in the case. We've been unhappy with much of what we've seen in the courts except for a few cases; I guess part of it is the fact that an awful lot of these people do not have good legal representation. That's one big part of it. Then the court seems to take a pretty standard attitude toward young people in Roxbury.

I've been involved in one or two cases in which they had a pat kind of projection of a situation. I'm thinking of a boy who was coming home from school one day, very fine youngster, one of the top youngsters in our program. He was accused of having assaulted a police officer. Now the boy's report, as well as that of his witnesses, was that he was on his way home from school, had gotten off the bus at Dudley Station and was giving his books to some friends who were girls when the police officer told him to move on. The boy claims that he said to the officer, "Just a minute, I want to send my books home, I'm going downtown." The police officer claims that the boy assaulted

him, but the evidence showed that the police officer had in fact struck the boy in the mouth. His father took him to a doctor within an hour after his arrival at home. The doctor stated that the boy's lip was cut and swollen, and of course when this came to trial, the police said the boy had a switchblade knife, the usual picture was blown up, and this is what I find generally wrong about court procedure. It's in need of a thorough overhauling. You always get the projection of these mean kids with switchblades; and this just isn't the case. They assume that every kid they come across is the tough punk, and they decide the case quite apart from the facts involved. There are some very alert probation people around, I've seen some good probation work, but the caseloads are too large to be realistic for real rehabilitation.

Police action is a central complaint in the cities. In the Harlem riots and all of these explosions, Harlem, New Jersey, Chicago, it's police action that triggers the thing. This is the thing that can touch off the explosion more readily than anything else. This is the symbol of the strong arm of the power structure, usually expressing itself in terms of containing the Negro community. When people talk about what needs to be changed in a community, this is the one felt need that is always expressed.

We try to express our identification with the things that hurt. People on our staff live in the community, and feel some of the hurt in the community.

One of our workers was standing on the sidewalk with some of our youngsters one evening when the police came by with their pattern way of saying, "Move on, get the hell out, break it up," and before he was able to get a shuffle on they had actually kicked him, and handled him very roughly.

I remember one night I was at Grove Hall when police came up and tried to break up the group to which I was talking. "Move on, get the hell on." I told them, "We're not moving anywhere." The officer felt very threatened by this. I was talking to a group of twelve kids, and he came over and explained that they always regarded a group of eight or ten people as dangerous and needing to be broken up. I said, "You don't have any precedent in law for this, we are not blocking the streets, we are not disturbing the peace, you certainly wouldn't have any constitutional grounds for breaking this up," and

I went into the first amendment. One officer felt really threatened by this; it happened there was another who seemed to be a little more perceptive and entered into the conversation. Without realizing it, this was saying an awful lot to these kids. I came to this job from Virginia where I was active in the Freedom Movement, in and out of jail and things like that, and Dr. King had invited me to come to Atlanta as an assistant in his office, when I came here. And these fellows were saying, all this talk of nonviolence is nonsense; this is what we were involved in. The fellows were deriding much of this, but we were still able to talk, with some levity, but right on the point. And when this happened, those fellows began to look at the thing in a different light, because in a sense I was saying to the officer, "Look, if you push them around, you push me around too," and we didn't move, and the officers came over and got engaged in a conversation.

Someone said the next day that I was leading a "demonstration" in Grove Hall, but I didn't realize they considered it as such. I was just talking with the guys. They actually had about eight patrol cars up there; that was ludicrous, but it just shows how the police so thoroughly misunderstand the mood and what's happening. I went down and talked with the captain the next night. He said he had tried to explain to his men that they've got to find a new approach, otherwise they provoke the situation.

There is great resistance to the idea, not only here but in most of the cities, of having a police review board. This request is one that has been constantly repeated. I think there's as strong a feeling against the Negro police as there is against the Irish, maybe more so, because fellows feel that here's a Negro who does some of the same things, is part of the same system, operates officially within the system as the others do. There's more resentment of the Negro police who are rough, because you don't expect it from your own color; when it comes, it comes harder. He's part of the system, he wants to be approved as the others do, so he enters wholeheartedly — I don't think it's a question of racial and ethnic identity, I think it's the general type of police work.

We have had a number of fathers and men in the community who would go out on weekends and at night and sort of patrol the streets, just to keep our

youngsters aware of what could happen, and to create a sense of confidence. Where there was a congregation of young people in a situation that might become volatile, they've tried to disperse it, to prevent trouble before it really explodes, this type of thing. One thing it's done is said to people that we are concerned about ourselves, and that there is a bond of responsibility here.

There have been some roving white gangs threatening the youth of our community. They have ridden into Negro neighborhoods to find groups of young people, trying to provoke fights, hurling obscenities and racial slurs; but our youngsters have generally realized that this was an effort to draw them into something, and many have come to understand just what this kind of thing does to the image of the community. A lot of the youngsters have been a part of a very intensive kind of study program in Freedom Schools, and I think they've gotten a new sense of their own direction, so that they're not so insecure that they feel they must respond to this kind of a situation.[5]

The Freedom Movement in the North was initiated, I think, out of a sense of shame through what Southern cousins have been doing. The explosive areas, for the most part, are not in the South. The Southern Negro is precisely the one who has done something to change his picture; the North has a harder fight because the targets are not so clearly defined. That's why you have a Roxbury.

Roxbury is not Harlem, but although it's not nearly so intense a concentration of people, the people hurt just as much from the same types of problems.

The few who have escaped into the suburbs have been the most desirable. This is where it seems to come to the hurting point for the non-Negro citizen of America: the kind of integrated society in which people would be free to live where they want. That oversimplifies it but it's the gut issue.

I wonder if there isn't a large part of the populace, if not a majority, that would rather see the country on the brink of nuclear war, even rather see the country destroyed, than see a Negro next door.

Notes

1. In 1966 piles of uncollected garbage were burned in the streets of the South End for three days as a protest against inadequate municipal services. Improvement followed, but only temporarily. A delegation from HEW, touring the ghetto early in 1968, pronounced Boston's streets "appalling."

2. Several rent strikes in the mid-sixties provided the incentive for passage of the rent receivership law.

3. Charlestown, with a high proportion of homeowners of low and middle income, reacted violently against urban renewal from the start.

4. Rev. Wood's concern led to the creation of a "street corner program" for alcoholic unemployables, and also to the organization of Roxbury's Opportunities Industrialization Center, which provides basic education and employment skills as well as specific job training in a number of areas.

5. A month after the assassination of Dr. King, a member of the teenage security patrol was approached in Roxbury by a group of white youths who challenged him to a drag race. He refused and they shot him.

"The hour is late. The old time schedule for social change is obsolete. Those with power must act with courage if we are to avoid chaos.

"It is futile to attempt to stem the tide of violence with even greater violence. The people impatiently call for justice and change and their reasonable demands must be met. Our very lives depend on it."

— *Bay State Banner*
Boston, July 27, 1967

About the Author

Deborah Bethell Zobel (1935–2026) was moved to write *Voices from a Ghetto* shortly after completing her studies at the Boston University School of Social Work in 1960. As a newly minted caseworker for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, she was assigned to provide support for families in and around the predominantly Black neighborhood of Roxbury.

But as a white woman living in a tony Boston suburb, she felt somewhat disconnected from many of her clients' issues. So she began devouring books, reports, and all the other background material she could find in that pre-internet age. She took on the chairmanship of the education subcommittee of the Lexington (Massachusetts) Civil Rights committee, served as publicity chair for the Lexington–METCO Community Committee (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity), and attended the August 1963 March on Washington, an experience she recounted in detail in the NAACP magazine *The Crisis.* While conducting the lengthy series of intimate interviews that form the core of *Voices from a Ghetto,* she also recorded and analyzed numerous radio and television broadcasts on issues of race relations — recordings that are occasionally punctuated by the voices of her young children.

In the decades that followed — which saw her remarry, becoming Deborah B. Wroth — she remained committed to the struggle for racial and gender equity. To the end of her life, she spoke frequently of her work in Roxbury and her experiences in the Civil Rights Movement, and she instilled in all of her children a belief that progress is both possible and necessary, no matter how long it may take.