

Department of History

3400 N. Charles Street
Baltimore MD 21218
410-516-7575 / Fax 410-516-7586

February 24, 2009

To: American Association for State and Local History
1717 Church Street
Nashville, TN 37203-2991

Dear Selection Committee,

There is no question in my mind that the Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth project is one of the single most exciting public history initiatives anywhere in the United States today. Over the past two years, I have frequently referred both students and colleagues to their resources, as well as drawing on the model established by the project in my own work. It is difficult for me to imagine a project that more exemplifies exactly what your national leadership award supports.

University of Baltimore and project director Professor Jessica Elfenbein already enjoy a national reputation for their excellent work in public and local history. Few of us who work on Baltimore's past would be able to make much headway in our research were it not Professor Elfenbein's path-breaking oral history work. The Langsdale Library is also a leader in digital humanities, with archivist Thomas Hollowack a tremendous source of knowledge and support for historians across the metropolitan area. Thus it is no surprise to me that the Baltimore '68 project has contributed exponentially to the primary documentation available for researching and teaching this pivotal moment in the city's history. As a scholar of race relations and urban history I owe a huge debt to this undertaking, as do my students. I am making extensive use of these resources in my own teaching and research.

But what really sets this project apart, I believe, is the way it has brought the community together, engaging a broad swath of Baltimore institutions, schools, neighborhoods, and citizens in this collaborative undertaking. This is no small achievement. And it is truly inspiring.

Starting well in advance of the conference, Professor Elfenbein and her project team began disseminating information about the April 2008 conference as well as its various components. Several faculty on my campus used the event as a basis for collaboration with local high school and middle school students. I followed suit, encouraging my own students to present their research at the conference and also used the event as a way to frame a collaborative initiative myself and other faculty launched through the JHU Center for Africana Studies which partnered Hopkins undergraduate students with local high school students with the goal of making a collection of short, documentary films about local student-lead movements for social change in the 1960s and beyond. Thus in the year leading up to the conference, educators, students, and

Department of History

3400 N. Charles Street
Baltimore MD 21218
410-516-7575 / Fax 410-516-7586

community members across the city found ourselves working toward a common goal and looking forward to a common event.

This was a huge accomplishment in itself. While Baltimore has an overwhelming rich array of historical resources and educational institutions even those of us who share common interests too often remain isolated from each other. Bridging these local divides can be harder than forging national collaborations at times. The Baltimore '68 project, however, went a long way toward making these barriers more permeable.

Having looked forward with excitement to the April conference, I was not at all disappointed. If anything, the event far exceeded my expectations. I can honestly say that I have never before participated in or have seen such an innovative way of creating a truly community conference or fostering a true dialogue between academics and a general public. When attendees checked in for the conference, they were asked, "Where were you in 1968?" or "Do you remember the 1968 riots?" Such questions not only proved a great opening to conversation but opened the door to an invitation to share memories as part of the oral history project as well. Those who were in Baltimore during the 1968 riots were also given pins encouraging others to ask them about their experiences. Watching those wearing the buttons approach each other to talk was every bit as exciting as noticing how many students and younger attendees also approached these individuals to take them up on the invitation. Talking across generations, sharing these memories, and providing the opportunity for Baltimore residents from diverse backgrounds to talk with each other -- all of these are among my fondest memories of this conference.

Setting the tone of the gathering in this way also empowered Baltimore residents to become full participants in the conference. I was humbled by the generosity of so many men and women who willingly shared their experiences and their insights. And I left the conference that weekend feeling so lucky to live and work in this incredible city.

The opportunity for community conversation and healing this project has opened up is equally impressive. Through ongoing community conversation and events held throughout the past year, the Baltimore '68 project has extended the enthusiasm of the April 2008 event and fostered more in-depth dialogue as well. Holding these meetings in diverse locations and on a range of days also has helped to draw in an even wider cross-section of the community. And I, for one, believe these efforts have made a real difference already. I see that difference in my own work on Baltimore's east side -- in neighborhoods deeply affected by the riots, and places where research has too often meant scholars coming into the neighborhood, benefiting from the generosity of local residents, and then leaving with those resources, never putting anything back into the community itself. Where two years ago requests for oral histories were simply met with skepticism, now residents ask, "Will you do what University of Baltimore did with the riots

Department of History

3400 N. Charles Street
Baltimore MD 21218
410-516-7575 / Fax 410-516-7586

conference?" This is no small tribute, indeed, to the strengths of this effort and the vision of those behind the project.

To fully communicate the many strength of this effort, I could literally fill many pages. Suffice it to say that I have been inspired by this effort as I think about my own work, both present and future. I draw regularly upon these resources in my own research and teaching. I also count myself lucky to have been among those to participate in many of the programs associated with this project. It is no surprise to me that Professor Elfenbein had accomplished this incredible effort. And I hope that you will see fit to recognize this important, and model, work.

Sincerely,



Melanie Shell-Weiss, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of History
Associate Research Scholar, Center for Africana Studies

Phone: (410)516-7663
Email: shellweiss@jhu.edu



Greater Homewood Community Corporation

Strengthening neighborhoods in north central Baltimore

February 26, 2009

Terry L. Davis, President and CEO
American Association for State and Local History
1717 Church Street
Nashville, TN 37203

Dear Dr. Davis,

I am the Executive Director of Greater Homewood Community Corporation (GHCC), a nonprofit organization that was established in 1969 to strengthen neighborhoods in north central Baltimore City by improving education, supporting youth development, and advancing economic development and community revitalization. I had the opportunity to participate in several pieces of the University of Baltimore's *Baltimore '68* initiative in 2008, and I can attest to this project's success in presenting a comprehensive, community-oriented interpretation of the civil unrest and urban renewal that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Baltimore '68 clearly strove to make the remembrance of Baltimore's riots much more than an academic conference but rather a series of events that encourage community participation. In my view, *Baltimore '68* was an exemplary public history event that drew people from neighborhoods across Baltimore to participate in discussions and to record their own oral histories. The initiative's website is a rich source of oral histories, photos, and news footage, an invaluable resource and a model for other public history projects. Project organizers also fostered the creation of an enduring piece of community art in the Baltimore '68 mosaic. We look forward to seeing the mosaic permanently installed in the community in the coming months.

Perhaps the greatest credit to *Baltimore '68* has been its ability to spark discussion and commemoration elsewhere within the city. *Baltimore '68* arrived at an opportune moment for our organization, occurring about a year before GHCC's fortieth anniversary. By bringing this seldom-discussed historical moment to the forefront, the organizers of *Baltimore '68* encouraged us to explore our organization's early history. Research that our staff conducted in the archives of the Johns Hopkins University (where GHCC began as a special project of university administrators in 1967) and in long-forgotten file boxes in our own office revealed our deep connection to the civil unrest of April 1968. We discovered that GHCC was an important part of the community organizing effort to stop suburban flight and keep Baltimore City communities strong, vibrant, and stable in the aftermath of the riots.

Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth taught GHCC some important lessons about its own history, and we believe we were only one of many examples of this across Baltimore City, given the cross-section of Baltimoreans that the project engaged as presenters, oral history storytellers, and participants in community art. This initiative has been enormously influential in telling GHCC's

story for our fortieth anniversary and represents local history at its best. We hope you will recognize the University of Baltimore with a Leadership in History Award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Karen Stokes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Karen" and last name "Stokes" clearly legible.

Karen Stokes
Executive Director