

Teen Empowerment presents...

Clarissa Uprooted: Youth and Elders Uncover the History of Black Rochester [2021 (26 mins)]

Links: <https://www.clarissauprooted.org/view/> (25 mins)
<https://vimeo.com/452282687>

Black teens—youth history ambassadors—in Rochester, open the documentary by describing the city that they see and experience. One names Rochester as “broken” another describes his fear of “not making it to adulthood.” Despite the crushing racism they and previous generations of Black residents faced, these teens lift and document the once vibrant community of Clarissa Street the “foundation of Afro-Rochester,” “the Mecca,” a place where you could find whatever you needed—friendships and shops—right in the community: “we had everything we needed right here,” every child was “like my child.” These teens interview former residents, now elders, to uncover the relationships, safety and traditions that made the Clarissa Street community. Elders describe the Easter parades and hats and the dancing on the street to the music of the time. “We didn’t have to go anywhere, we had everything we needed right here.”

Shane Wiegand (Antiracist Curriculum Project at The PathStone Foundation) lays out the Great Migration pattern that populated northern cities and how redlining restricted where Black people could live; this included the intentional design of segregation in Rochester. But despite rampant racism, the community of Clarissa Street built shops, shared responsibility for raising children who developed skills and talent. One of the Clarissa Street elders was the first Black officer in the RPD. The Teen Empowerment Youth asked about the “riots” that started on July 24, 1964; these were described by the elders with great detail including a story of a helicopter that crashed into one of the elder’s former homes. The youth are asked, “Was it a riot or as it a rebellion?”; the resounding response is rebellion. Elders and youth make the connection between 1964 and current times in terms of the desperation Black people experience. The documentary also addresses Eminent Domain, Urban Renewal, and the mid-50s highway construction that began to break up Clarissa Street. These took homes from residents, and physically drove people apart. But the community remembers, and collective memory is strong; now the teens are documenting it, otherwise, “As long as the enemy is telling your story, its not going to come out the way you want it to come out.”

Additional Resources:

<https://www.rit.edu/cityartspace/exhibitions/clarissa-uprooted-exhibit>
<https://www.clarissauprooted.org/exhibit/> June 3-July 24, 2022 at RIT's City Art Space (280 E. Main St., Rochester, NY). Gallery Hours: Mon-Wed: Closed, Thurs, Sat-Sun: 1PM-5PM, Friday: 1PM-9PM. “For 25 years, the Clarissa Street Reunion (CSR) has kept the memory of the Clarissa Street community alive with an annual street festival. In 2019, Teen Empowerment hired a group of teen Youth History Ambassadors (YHAs) to work with the CSR to capture oral histories. Together, “intergenerational history ambassadors”—TE youth and Clarissa St. elders—have worked with scholars to build an exhibit that uncovers how Rochester became what it is today.

The Clarissa Uprooted exhibit focuses on Clarissa Street, the once thriving African-American residential and business corridor in Rochester, NY’s Third Ward, known for its celebrated Pythodd

children's institute



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Jazz Club. Humanities scholars have eagerly emerged from libraries, museums, and academia to assist in curating the exhibit. The youth and elders have brought first-hand expertise and the archivists, historians, journalists, preservationists and scholars have brought resources, technology, and context to help frame interpretive questions.”

<https://www.wxxinews.org/connections/2019-08-13/connections-previewing-the-2019-clarissa-street-reunion> This podcast highlights the vibrant history of Clarissa Street, once referred to as “Rochester’s Broadway.”

“Teen Empowerment has been working with young people in the community to train them as history ambassadors for the area. The ambassadors say they’ve learned Clarissa Street is a microcosm of Rochester’s history—from music and black-owned businesses, to redlining, institutional racism, and poverty. The ambassadors join us, along with longtime Clarissa Street residents, to preview the festival and to discuss how the neighborhood has changed over the last several decades.”

www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2020/08/20/rochester-center-teen-empowerment-clarissa-street-uprooted-documentary/5615217002/