

Kelly Carroll for NYPAP

Inspired by Grassroots Stories: Community Architectural Advocacy

Keith Taylor – Dorrance Brooks Property Owners & Residents Association

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Kelly Carroll: Good afternoon, this is Kelly Carroll for the New York Preservation Archive Project. This is a series of interviews with New York City preservation activists on the grassroots level, and it's called...the series is called: "Inspired by Grassroots Stories: Community Architectural Advocacy." Before we begin our conversation today with Dr. Keith Taylor, I want to thank the New York State Council on the Arts and also Pat Reisinger for making this program possible today.

I'm going to introduce Dr Keith Taylor, who,

Keith Taylor: Hello! How are you?

Kelly Carroll: Hello! He is an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Law, Police Science and Criminal Justice Administration at John Jay College. A native New Yorker, he served as a public safety professional for 26 years, retiring as an assistant commissioner. At the NYPD, he was inducted into its Honor Legion for performing an act of bravery at imminent personal risk; he was promoted from undercover narcotics detective to detective sergeant where he supervised Internal Affairs, Missing Persons, Emergency Service Unit (Special Weapons and Tactics), and Federal Emergency Management Agency Urban Search and Rescue teams, receiving a commendation from Federal Bureau of Investigations Director Robert Mueller for resolving an incident of national significance at the United Nations' New York City headquarters. As Commanding Officer of an Intelligence Bureau, he developed/improved policies, standards, and evaluation methodologies, specialized training, and interagency law enforcement coordination at the local, state and federal levels. During this time he earned masters degrees from City College of New York and the Naval Postgraduate School, as well as a doctorate from Columbia University's Teachers College. In addition to that, he is now the current chair of the landmarks committee at Manhattan's Community Board 10.

So, we have a very decorated individual with us today and I'm going to ask...so Keith is also the President of the Dorrance Brooks Property Owners & Residents Association where he currently resides. So, with all that--I'm familiar with the neighborhood, I used to be a resident myself--and Keith, when did you move to what's now known as Dorrance Brooks Square more prolifically because of your work?

Keith Taylor: Thank you for that incredible introduction, I just wanted to say when we first got on this Zoom call I was busy walking my dog, because my wife does not know me with all those titles, she knows me as Keith, and so you know, Keith is fine for this interview. I much prefer that title.

We moved into this house that we live in, which is right directly across the street from Dorrance Brooks Square in 2002. It was part of a New York City HPD effort to rejuvenate houses in the area, and so they wanted to get civil servants: teachers, firefighters, police officers into those homes through a lottery process, a housing lottery process. I was fortunate enough to win the lottery over the 3000 individuals who applied for the 20 homes that were available, and this was my...fortunately was able to get my top

choice because it is so beautiful. The location is really incredible in a number of different ways, both for its architectural beauty, as well as the cultural significance for everyone, but specifically for people of African descent, because a lot of important things happened here related to the Harlem Renaissance, the development of all the arts and culture and music, and also the Civil Rights movement. It was also in Central Harlem that some of the planning activities occurred on these streets. So, the area offers a lot, in both the architectural beauty, as well as the cultural and historical significance for the city and the nation. So, that's a long-winded answer as to how I got here.

Kelly Carroll: Oh, that's amazing that you were selected through a lottery and I, I think that the new historic district is even luckier to have you, you won that lottery, so that you could uplift and put this literally on the map, you and your organization. So, I want to talk about your neighborhood organization which is the Dorrance Brooks Property Owners and Residents Association. When did that organization form and who are the founders?

Keith Taylor: It started at least 30 years ago in 1976. Earlean Golson who's a neighbor, she lives three doors down at 36 Edgecombe. She was running it back then, and there was an article in the *New York Times* in 2001, it showed a picture of our block and talked about the changing neighborhoods in Harlem and my home was actually still boarded up. It was still, you know, what was previously a city-owned S. R. O. and had been boarded up. It was about to be gut renovated on the interior. So, the block association has been around for years, and it has fought to keep the neighborhood as it is to maintain things like cleanliness, and on time collection of trash, and efforts to beautify through planting of flowers and making certain that there's a voice to protect not just the block, but also Dorrance Brooks Square to keep it as accessible and as clean and looking as it should.

Kelly Carroll: Right. There's um, this is very common, I've found in Harlem, that there are these long-standing community organizations that focus on quality-of-life issues for the residents. Would you agree that Harlem has a culture of community activism?

Keith Taylor: Absolutely, and I think that it's from the grassroots efforts that you really get the most astounding kinds of outcomes. We as a block association, we were a few years ago in 2018...we were really concerned because the development pressures were severe in this area, and we were trying to figure out how, what we could do, what options we had to perhaps save it. And there was a church, in particular, Mount Calvary Church, which was on the chopping block because the owner wanted to tear down this historic church for development purposes. The houses here are 130 years old. It's like walking back in time when you walk in these neighborhoods and to see it torn down--simply because it's part of Manhattan and Manhattan was a hot real estate scene--it's really discouraging for those who love this community, love the people here, love the history here and want to maintain that for future generations.

Kelly Carroll: Yeah, you're exactly right about this this march of development entering Harlem and, unlike southern neighbors the Upper West and East Sides, who prophylactically had all of their landmark protections in place before this this really big wave, the current wave we're experiencing of gentrification--not the healthy kind.

Keith Taylor: Right.

Kelly Carroll: What do you feel, was Mount Calvary the catalyst for when your organization really kicked up the preservation efforts?

Keith Taylor: Yes, it was because the demo permits had been issued, and we were really sort of doing a lot of hand wringing and soul searching trying to figure out what we could do to slow that down-- possibly stop it--and have an alternative use for that beautiful church, while maintaining its architectural honesty. So, I got in contact with a couple of organizations that are involved in local community preservation. One was the West Harlem Community Preservation Organization and Yuien Chin as the executive director, she's been helping communities like ours for many years and, and also the Historic Districts Council which Simon Bankoff, Simeon Bankoff, was there and he's been doing the same thing.

So, we had them come to United Methodist Church here, St. Marks that sort of church in its own right, in a community meeting and that got the ball rolling. We were able to get in contact through these two organizations with a great historic preservationist architect, Marissa Marvelli. She helped us create the application that was the basis for our approval at the Federal level and at the State level as a historic district, and now at the city level. It took many hands to put this together, there are many different people, elected officials and Save Harlem Now, other community organizations that were really trying to prevent the types of tragedies that have occurred in terms of the loss of the unique, one-of-a-kind historic identity of this neighborhood. And two blocks down there was the Harlem Renaissance Ballroom-- I'm sorry—the Renaissance ballroom...

Kelly Carroll: The Renaissance, yes.

Keith Taylor: Otherwise known as the Renny. A lot of history there and it was torn down after having been neglected for many years, the developers that bought the place said that it was too far gone to incorporate in their new designs. To me, that sounds like benign neglect. But that was a reason given to say, just wholesale tearing it down and putting up the new, modern building that is not at all in scale or the context in any way to the existing neighborhood. The good news is, the historic district that we applied for and got approved by Landmarks Preservation Commission includes the area across the street from the former Renaissance ballroom so it's got sort of a wide swath from West 135th and Seventh, so around Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard all the way up to 140th and St. Nicholas Ave. It corresponds and connects to the existing Strivers Row Historic District, so it makes it one big area now of two combined historic districts. And I think I counted it, it's over 300 and something like 350 buildings now, 250 with this this most recent addition.

Kelly Carroll: Right and the adjoining historic districts that you just mentioned were--it was designated in 1967...

Keith Taylor: Yes

Kelly Carroll: ...so it had been it had been really since the creation of our city's Landmarks Law that the Landmarks Preservation Commission...that much time had passed before they came back to this area of Harlem. Luckily, many of the buildings were unscathed and I would guess that it's because of the quality of their craftsmanship and their building materials that they survived that long, as well as the stewardship of their residents, of people who lived there.

Keith Taylor: I think also there may be an economic reason as well. There may not have been the interest in development of this area over the many years, up until say the last twenty. So that lack of

interest helped to preserve our housing stock as it exists. Now that there's a great interest in development, it's very difficult to hold on to what we've got. People took for granted for many years, it's not the case anymore.

Kelly Carroll: That's an excellent point, and what you just said about what we've always had for many years now people, you know, are realizing that it's...it's not there it's not there by accident. I truly believe that communities should have the power to self-determine their own futures and I'm so glad that landmarking can at least keep the place looking the same.

And so, I wanted to ask you, so you got Federal designation first. You were listed on the National Register of Historic Places—the State and National Registers—and then, a couple of years later you've got New York City Historic District designation, which is the law that has teeth. Both of these designations required outreach and so, I would like to know how you were able to talk to the other property owners in the neighborhood about each of these listings and what that was like.

Keith Taylor: Yeah, that was simply grassroots efforts, having meetings—which we had been doing anyway—but having meetings with all the neighbors, having the folks from the agencies involved, like the State Historic Preservation Office, come down and meet with residents at our block association meetings, as well as you know, the folks that I mentioned already, to educate them, to talk to them about the process. Specifically, the city landmarking because there are negative connotations about the cost, the increased costs perceived to homeowners because of you know, this additional scrutiny from Landmarks Preservation for any changes that have to be made to the exterior of the home. And also, just the concern that landmarking would make it more difficult for homeowners, possibly affect their value of their home. Maybe even be a way of making it more difficult for the folks that live here to stay here—that'd be long term residents—and so that educational process was very helpful because it allowed them to ask questions and to come to an understanding that landmarking was not a method of trying to get rid of the population that lives there and that, in fact, opened up various avenues of resources to homeowners to allow them to maintain and improve their homes. I have, for instance, a solar panel system on my roof, as a result of the tax credits that I got from the State and the Federal Government as a result of that landmarking status. And so, the city status will add additional opportunities for assistance, financial assistance to homeowners who need to improve their homes.

Kelly Carroll: The historic preservation tax credit is an amazing tool and you have to be in an eligible census tract, which you are. It's something that I wish we could do—we, we as preservationists—could do more to spread this knowledge, because it's such an incredible tool and incentivizes the preservation of one's home or block.

Keith Taylor: Indeed.

Kelly Carroll: So, let's talk about the neighborhood itself. Dorrance Brooks Square has the amazing superlative of being the first public place in New York City to be named for an African American person, and that was back in 1925. He was a World War One soldier who never made it home to Harlem, where he was from. He died in France, a decorated war hero.

Would you like to talk a little bit about what it means to you and your community to then be in 2021-- just in June--the first New York City Historic District in our city's history to be named for an African American person?

Keith Taylor: I will say you know, being proud goes without saying. Having a sense of responsibility to remember the sacrifices of those who came before us also comes to mind and that particular struggle and journey of you know, the African American experience dealing with Jim Crow segregation 100 years ago and understanding the commitment to this country that these young men of color had to have in order to fight overseas for democracy, on behalf of this country, which held them as second class citizens in every sense of the imagination. So, being able to honor Dorrance Brooks, who is a hero and died fighting for this country despite all the challenges presented to him as an African American young man.

It is humbling and certainly gives me a sense of purpose regarding my activities to preserve this beautiful area for future generations. So, my grandkids will know that the little park across the street from our House was the first public square named for an African American in the City of New York, and then the historic district in which it resides is the same thing, the first to be named after private first-class Dorrance Brooks: Harlem Hell Fighter.

Kelly Carroll: And when you get off the B/C train, when you look north it'll look pretty much the same as it always has, and I think that's a wonderful thing. If only we could landmark the people, which I always say. So, in that vein, what else do you think needs to be done in Harlem? Because you know, I also always say the architecture doesn't change when you go north of 96th street, or 110, or whatever people are saying where Harlem starts now--depending on their real estate interests--what more needs to be done in Harlem do you think, what would help Harlem out?

Keith Taylor: Well Harlem, you look at the individuals that live here now, there are a lot of socioeconomic challenges. It is an impoverished urban neighborhood and so there's everything with the standard of living, the housing that is substandard for the many of the residents here...I think we have 60% of this neighborhood is you know, at or below the poverty level. The schools' performance. The difficulties regarding youth and violence, which is pronounced and continuing. And of course, the pandemic, which has added a layer of complexity to all these problems by highlighting the lack of access to adequate medical care for many residents, here, resulting in much higher rates of individuals succumbing to the pandemic itself.

So, there are there are a lot of issues--large scale issues--that really need to be addressed for the folks that live here, but one of the things that can get lost is this idea of preserving the historic integrity of the neighborhoods which really are incredibly beautiful, and that can be evidenced by the tourists that come from around the world to see the architecture. To see where you know, Langston Hughes' home was or Ella Baker, Ella Baker sang, or Augusta Savage painted her great works known throughout the world 100 years ago, affecting the cultural future of this country. So, those are the things that come to mind, we have the large-scale big issues that we have to worry about and deal with effectively. And also staying focused, keeping the eye on the prize in terms of preserving as much of this neighborhood's integrity as possible.

Kelly Carroll: Absolutely. When the landmarks process was moving forward, there were some issues with some houses of worship within the proposed boundary lines and I would like to know how this has panned out. We're losing our houses of worship and I think that they are endemic to our shared culture as a nation. And you know, I go abroad, and I see houses of worship in other countries and they're all still there. They might not be holy places or spaces anymore, but it's nice to have them around and it's, they're very much a part of the fabric of Harlem, so would you like to talk about that?

Keith Taylor: Absolutely, there was a study done by the Manhattan Borough President's office, which is accessible online about the destruction of houses of worship in Upper Manhattan and how developers have been targeting these areas, because they are large development plots, and they can get a lot of value out of using every bit of available building area to--F.A.R.--to their advantage. It's still Manhattan real estate and whatever gets built has a Manhattan address.

So, I think there was an article recently that said that New York City is higher in rent costs than even San Francisco--the most expensive place to live in the world, right now--and that's nothing new. The question becomes how do we make this city, how do we make this neighborhood as equitable as possible, so that you can have socioeconomic diversity in the neighborhood to the level that is needed, to the level that exists, currently. And until those issues are dealt with in a meaningful way we're going to continue to have a lot of difficulties managing the housing crisis and the other things that I mentioned earlier.

Kelly Carroll: So, I think we have time for about one more question and I have a question for you, maybe time for two more questions. I have a question for you about the actual boundary lines of the historic district because this area of Harlem is a mix of row houses and tenements. I used live on the tenement block on 135th Street with the walk of fame and I noticed--love that blocked by the way, very loud though, across from the precinct--

Keith Taylor: Yes.

Kelly Carroll: I noticed that in the National Register boundaries, the tenement block at the northern part of the district is not there, but the Landmarks Commission decided to include that tenement building. The really beautiful one that kind of has the middle, the center part with a cornice and then it fans out like a like a row of books. Do you know why, though, that those boundaries are different, or why that tenement block was decided to be kept?

Keith Taylor: I don't know, I can tell you that you know what's most interesting about this effort is that we, the application to the City Landmarks Commission, the Landmarks Preservation Commission included only the boundaries that we had for the Federal and State applications. Landmarks Preservation Commission came back to us and said, we want to add more.

Kelly Carroll: Wow.

Keith Taylor: So, Landmarks Preservation came back with a proposal that was almost double the size of our initial application, and this is because the Community Board, local Community Board 10, about ten years ago had actually created a historic preservation plan and identified nine areas worthy of consideration by LPC for future preservation. So, they combined number four and number five. We were number four, and number five was the area south of Strivers' Row. So, it's 137th and 136th from Seventh Avenue to Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard to Frederick Douglass Boulevard. So now it's, we're all one big happy family with Strivers' Row Historic District. And up the hill we have the iconic City College in New York, which is its historic district. Sugar Hill is just north of that, it's also preserved.

So, this area now around Alexander Hamilton's House, which is a Federal park in St. Nicholas Park is all preserved for future generations. It's a wonderful thing for people to come and visit. And we have a brand-new hotel --the Marriott Hotel--on 125th Street in the former Victoria Theater building, so there

are facilities for people. I kind of sound like I'm a salesperson for Harlem tourism, but I understand that as an important part of helping to keep areas like this, alive.

Kelly Carroll: Absolutely and utilize the buildings that are historic and character defining features of the neighborhood.

So, our last question today, Keith, is having tremendous success getting the newest New York City Historic District designated the newest district in Harlem which has two sections, as you just explained. What would you impart to other neighborhoods in your area or everywhere, because you know, we're feeling development pressure in the Bronx and Brooklyn—in Staten island even--what advice would you give them having just gone through this process, about how they could preserve the places that they care about?

Keith Taylor: Well, you know it's so funny we just spoke about that historic preservation plan. If they Google Community Board 10 historic preservation plan it lays out, step by step, the efforts that a local block association can take to get this kind of inertia going to get, to get in contact with your local elected officials and community stakeholders and basically to allow for the synergy that's necessary to take place in order to get this effort done. We were very fortunate in that we started officially three years ago, and we are in the final leg of this journey, and I suspect within the first, the next few weeks we may get a hearing at City Council to get the final approval for the city process.

Kelly Carroll: I hope so. Yeah, you know, it was a relatively quick process and I'm thrilled that the Landmarks Commission has been focusing more attention on communities of color in the past few years. The groups that have beautiful neighborhoods have beautiful cultural significance and it has definitely been past due. So, congratulations to you and to your organization. New York is lucky to have you and future New York is going to be even luckier, so thank you so much for your time today Keith and...

Keith Taylor: Thank you so much for your patience as I've been running around trying to take care of some things as I'm leaving my home for vacation. But I feel like I'm the one who should be very thankful for having the opportunity and the ability to make life better for folks that are here and hopefully for future generations as well.

Kelly Carroll: Excellent well, I hope that you enjoy your vacation.