The Other Side of Middletown: Living in Muncie’s African American Community

A Photographic Honors Thesis by:

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Abstract

Beginning with Robert S. and Helen Lynd’s 1929 study, *Middletown* and continuing through subsequent works, Muncie has become one of the most researched small cities in America. However, the African American community was openly disregarded in “Middletown” and continually underrepresented in later research.

In 2002, a project was started to help remedy this research gap. Under the guidance of Luke Eric Lassiter, Beth Campbell and Hurley Goodall, Ball State students at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry worked with community members to write a collaborative ethnography entitled *The Other Side of Middletown*. The work sought to record conversations concerning the history and current state of Muncie’s African American community.

In 2003, I began a photographic project under the same name. This project aspires to complement and supplement the collaborative ethnography. By utilizing a photojournalistic approach, the project paints an intimate portrait of life within the African American community of Muncie.

Acknowledgements

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Dolores and Carl Rhinehart, the congregation of Shaffer Chapel, Robert “Smokey” Vance and Pastor Martel Winburn for hospitably inviting me into their lives.

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Rationale

I began working on this project during the Spring 2004 semester at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry. Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Beth Campbell and Hurley Goodall were leading a group of students and community members to write *The Other Side of Middletown*, a collaborative ethnography of the African American community of Muncie, Indiana. With a background in photojournalism and anthropology, it was my task to illustrate the book. However, I wanted to do more.

Photography could do more than simply illustrate the text; it could be used to supplement and add to the research. I aimed to paint a portrait of life in this community and therefore establish another level of understanding as well as another form of documentary research.

I envisioned a series of photo essays that each told a story and together would approach a portrait of the community overall. During the semester, I attended interviews with community members in each of the book’s areas of research: family, education, work, recreation, religion, and community activities. These interviews gave me a better understanding of the community and gave me an opportunity to find important themes while searching for stories that could be photographed. Typically, I listened to people talk, identified what was important to them, and then searched for other community members that were currently living through similar experiences.

I set a slower pace for this project than I have for past photojournalism work. Instead of turning in photos every day, I could spend time building relationships with my subjects. Many days would not produce a single image. However, these relationships
Joyce Jamerson holds her seven year old daughter, Jailah, in her right arm and her newborn daughter, Brianna, in her other arm as she recovers in the hospital.

Above: Derrick Jamerson waits in the doctor’s office as his wife, Joyce, is being prepared to give birth to their new daughter, Brianna.

Left: Derrick Jamerson kisses his wife, Joyce, as she rests with their newborn daughter, Jailah, lying on her chest.
were the foundation of my work and are reflected in the intimacy of the final images. The project intensified through the summer of 2003 and continued until the end of the year.

All images were shot using a Nikon D100, a digital single lens reflex camera. This camera allowed a good balance between quality of images and non-obtrusiveness. It also fit within the budget restraints.

The project resulted in a collection of nine photo essays, which follow below.

The Jamerson Family

As the project progressed, I decided that a good introductory essay would be one featuring the beginning of life in the community. How would a family feel about bringing new life into Muncie? What life would they envision for their child?

I contacted several members of the community and informed them of my search. I found many women who recently had had children. But I had difficulties finding anyone who was soon to give birth. In July, Julius Anderson introduced me to Joyce Jamerson and her family.

Both Joyce and her husband, Derrick, had a previous marriage and a child before meeting each other. When I met them, they were building their family together by raising their children into the same household and having additional children together.

Before dawn on September 9, I joined Joyce and Derrick as they traveled from their home to Ball Memorial Hospital. A few hours later, Brianna Jamerson was born. I stayed with the family throughout the day as Joyce rested and the other children met their new sister. Due to complications, Joyce and Derrick stayed at the hospital for a week. I visited them a few times, then followed them as they brought Brianna to her new home.
Pastor Larry McCoy and Pastor Carlton Lynch bury Julie Lones into the White River during a baptism sacrament symbolic of death and rebirth. Pastors from Shaffer Chapel hope to revive the tradition of river baptism that the church has not practiced for over 40 years.

Above: Pastors Larry McCoy, Martel Winburn and Carlton Lynch lead prayer before the baptism begins.

Left: Pastor Larry McCoy carries Rashae Love into the White River to be baptized.
White River Baptism

In one of many discussions with Pastor Martel Winburn of Shaffer Chapel, he told me that he was planning to host an old-fashioned baptism in the White River. Though his church once regularly conducted such events, it had not hosted an outdoor baptism for over sixty years. Pastor Winburn hoped to revitalize the practice and begin an annual practice.

In this occasion, the waiting game worked. I stayed in touch with Pastor Winburn and found out a few months later that the baptism was scheduled. I planned to shoot it to represent the role of religion and to show how the church was starting a new tradition by bringing back an old tradition.

After waiting months for the baptism, I had to make all of my photographs in under an hour. This shoot was likely the most stressful of all the stories. Everything happened quickly, so I had think fast and let my reflexes take over. Despite the time limitations, it is one of my favorite photo essays.

Richard “Smokey” Vance

I met Smokey while attending Family Night at Garfield Elementary School and was immediately struck by his story. Smokey is a single father. Because he is on disability payments, he can dedicate the bulk of his time to his daughter, Stephanie. He even joins her at school once a week to have lunch with her and her friends.

As I joined him on his porch, I realized that he is not only a father to his own children, but is also a father figure to many children in his neighborhood. Kids throughout his apartment complex will come to his porch to play with him. He is quick to
Stephanie Vance cups her father's, Richard "Smokey" Vance, face in her hands while playing around in the living room of their Muncie, Ind. apartment. Since being put on disability in 1993, "Smokey" has been able to dedicate most of his time to being a single father. "My life revolves around my kids. That's the beginning and end story of me," he says.
joke with, teach or discipline them as necessary. He even keeps a closet full of bicycle parts and regularly services bikes from all over the neighborhood. Once, I watched as he swept up a girl who had fallen and hurt herself, soothed her and bandaged her cuts.

I often joined Smokey in his apartment and bantered with him on his porch. I also accompanied him to Garfield Elementary to have lunch with his daughter.

Muncie Central Basketball

In one of the few times that African Americans are mentioned in Middletown, the Lynds observe that the Muncie Central basketball served as a unifying point where community members of all races and classes could come together. The basketball served as partial inspiration for the late 1980s movie “Hoosiers.” Basketball has its own culture and reputation in Indiana.

I knew that the team was important to the community and that the season should be documented. I began attending practices, games and social events associated with the team throughout the 2004 season.

Since I began shooting this story before I had fully realized the overall scope and goal of “The Other Side of Middletown” project, I changed my focus several times. Throughout the season, I followed the members of the team on the bus, in the locker room, onto the court and into restaurants after games. I went through my images and tried to figure out what they were telling me.

The story I decided to tell is one of a team trying to regain their legendary past. Though Muncie Central still has the most state championships than any other team in Indiana, it has not won a championship in years. Recently, however, the school brought
In the original 1920s study of Muncie, Middletown, Muncie Central basketball was cited as the one unifying force in the community. Though Muncie Central still holds more state championships than any other team in Indiana, it has not won a championship in over a decade.

*Above:* Cheerleaders Ashley Barnes and Carla Armstrong exchange gossip during a high school basketball game at Muncie Central.

*Right:* After several seasons of finishing short of their aspirations, Muncie Central pulled Coach Bill Harrell out of retirement in hopes of rebuilding the team’s reputation. Harrell is a local legend, one of the most most winningest high school basketball coaches in the nation.
back Bill Harrell, a legendary basketball coach, in hopes of revitalizing the team. It is up to the players to regain the prestige that many of their parents once held. Unfortunately, their aspirations fell short this season as they fell out of the tournament during a regional game.

Joshua Hughes

The story of Joshua Hughes is one of love defying social boundaries and changing people’s perspectives. I was surprised to find out the extent to which interracial dating was still considered taboo in Muncie.

Josh and his girlfriend hid their relationship from her parents because she was afraid they would not approve of interracial dating. After a period where Josh felt demeaned and ashamed of, her parents gradually became aware and accepting of their situation.

Josh also underwent a transformation of ideals. He had always assumed, though he had dated several white women, that he would eventually marry an African American woman. He told me that that was “the way things were,” and that all of his relatives had done the same. Over the course of my time with Josh, he told me that love had changed his outlook and that he no longer cared what race the woman he married would be.

I mainly followed Josh through his prom experience, though I also attended a track and field event and several social outings with him. Most of our time was spent in discussion.
To celebrate his crowning as Prom King, Joshua Hughes gave up his dance with the Prom Queen to savor the moment with his date, Patricia Gorenc. “I always thought I’d marry an African American wife,” Hughes says. “I thought I was supposed to. But, now that I’ve fallen in love with Tricia, I don’t care what race I marry.”

Joshua Hughes and Patricia Gorenc fell quickly in love after meeting a year ago. However, their kept their relationship secret in fear of what their parents might think.
The Miss Black Ball State Pageant was started when African American students were not allowed to compete in the Miss Ball State Pageant. Miss Black Ball State was later renamed the Miss Unity Pageant to encourage a more diverse group of contestants. Though both pageants are now open to all female students, Miss Ball State contestants are predominately Anglo American and Miss Unity contestants are predominately African American.

I used the Miss Unity Pageant as a way to incorporate Ball State into the series of essays. As I started attending practices, something drew me towards one contestant in particular, TaNesha Moore. I followed TaNesha as she prepared for the competition. I watched as she had her nails done and as her aunt set up a personal hair salon in her dorm room.

I spent the bulk of the pageant backstage to record the relationship between the contestants and to capture their emotions. I shot performance shots during the pageant and during the dress rehearsal, when I could move more freely. I was very excited when TaNesha won the event and was named Miss Unity 2003.

During an interview with Daedra Pryor for the “Making a Home” chapter, I started thinking about the significance of owning a house. Daedra built her home with Habitat for Humanity and therefore the house had special meaning to her; she proudly described the location of each nail she pounded in. Since Habitat homeowners directly
TaNesha Moore performs during the 2003 Miss Unity Pageant. The competition was originally called the Miss Black Ball State Pageant, started when African American students could not enter the Miss Ball State Pageant.

TaNesha Moore yells in excitement as she sees that her image is being projected to the Miss Unity Pageant audience. Soon after, she was crowned Miss Unity 2003.
work on their own houses and since the experience was so important to Daedra, I decided to contact Muncie’s Habitat for Humanity.

After I contacted the Muncie office, I discovered that Habitat for Humanity was making a focused effort on building in Whitely, one of the predominately African American neighborhoods. I started volunteering on their construction projects to better understand the process.

I met Denise Hill while working on the structure that would eventually become her home. We started talking about how important the building was to her. She had never been able to own her own house. After her divorce, her ex-husband taunted her with the claim that she would never own her own home and would never amount to anything. Since the divorce she and her sons had lived in several different apartments. She felt unstable and uncertain in the apartments. When I asked her what she saw as she walked through the frame of the house, she told me that she could envision her sons running around and laughing in their new home.

I spent almost every Saturday morning working with Habitat for Humanity while looking for photographic opportunities. Over the period of construction, I spent a lot of time with Denise and her two sons as they lived at her mother’s house.

It was amazing to be with Denise as the house was finished and the keys were given over to her. She cried with tears of joy and could not complete the acceptance speech. She had a moving van parked nearby and started moving in immediately after the ceremony was over. A few nights later, I was in her one of her son’s bedrooms (it was the first time they had separate rooms) and saw the boys pray to God and thank Him for each room of the house.
“Thank you God for our new house,” said Micah Hill, left, as he prays at his bedside with Denise and Michael Hill. By building a house through Habitat for Humanity, Denise has become a first-time homeowner and her sons now each have their own bedroom.

Above: Outside of her new house, Denise cries with joy as she thanks all who helped her become a homeowner. “I felt so overjoyed to have people I don’t even know helping me build my house,” Hill said.

Above: Hill was required to put at least 250 hours of labor into the construction project.

Left: On Sept. 29, Denise Hill became the owner of her first house as she and her sons, Micah and Michael, cut a ribbon strung across her porch.
Denise has changed drastically since becoming a homeowner. I talked about it with her this afternoon. She told me that before Habitat accepted her, she hardly ever smiled and was routinely depressed. She now is quick to smile and has a new confidence. She is working retrain herself so that she may get a better job and be more able to provide for her children.

Monte Murphy

Inspired by the life of Hurley Goodall, I wanted to follow another one of Muncie’s “Firehouse Democrats” – firefighters who were actively involved in politics. Hurley introduced me to Monte Murphy, a firefighter who was also Muncie’s only African American city council member.

I was soon discouraged by the story. I spent many days in the firehouse, but few calls came in while I was there. Though I learned a lot about politics from Monte, I made very few pictures.

Suddenly, everything changed. A controversy erupted over the proposed renaming of Broadway Avenue to Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Avenue. Randall Sims, President of the Whitely Neighborhood Association, came up with the idea, but it was Monte who drafted the legislation, proposed it to the Muncie City Council and supported it through the process. He and Randall quickly gravitated to the center of the issue, which escalated to racial outbursts, an organized protest down Broadway Avenue and federal mediation after the proposal was refused. Through Monte Murphy, I had a front row seat throughout the process.
Top: Immediately after the Muncie City Council voted to defeat the bill to rename Broadway Avenue to Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, Monte Murphy silently shows his disappointment. Murphy, the city's only African American council member, introduced the bill.

Above Right: Demonstrators march down Broadway Avenue to protest the defeat of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard bill.

Below Right: Monte Murphy sorts through piles of election paperwork while his father looks on.
The events surrounding the controversy also allowed me to explore the subjectivity of anthropological participant-observation. I felt passionately about the name change. Instead of limiting my involvement in order to preserve journalistic objectivity, I was able to do what I thought was right. Though participating in the events, I lost some chances to make images, but I also believe I gained more trust, which allowed me to show another angle of local history.

Dolores and Carl Rhinehart

The Rhinehart’s were very active community advisors for the book, working on the “Making a Living” chapter. I began photographing them early in the project.

Dolores and Carl own a barbershop on Broadway Avenue. Though they retired several years ago and turned the shop over to renters, loyal customers pleaded with Dolores to come back and they now work once a week. Every Monday, she takes care of her old clients. Carl maintains the shop. Despite their age, the Rhinehart’s continue to show the work ethic and dedication necessary to operate a small business that caters to a minority community.

Uncompleted Stories

I may forever be haunted by the stories that I was not able to complete during my time living in Muncie.

Eric Johnson is an amazing man. He is a Muncie native, but he works in Indianapolis, lives in Indianapolis, and recently married a woman who lives in Indianapolis. However, he spends most nights out of his week in Muncie to care for his sick mother.
Rosemary Evans reads a magazine as she waits in the Rhineharts' Barbershop in Muncie. Though the Rhineharts retired several years ago, loyal customers, such as Evans, convinced them to continue to work a few days each week.

Left: Carl and Dolores Rhinehart stand in the barbershop that they built and have operated for over forty years. Once a week, Dolores will style hair as Carl maintains the shop.
Eric symbolizes many important forces. He is representative of the skilled youth that leave Muncie in order to find work. He embodies the deep responsibility many African American men feel towards their mother. That his love for his mother and for his wife at times conflict is not an uncommon situation. Because of his giant heart, his story deserves to be told.

However, his mother’s health was too far in decline. Several times I sent up appointments that would have to be cancelled because of his mother’s needs. I did not think it was right to continue this story when he needed to focus his time, energy and emotion on his mother.

Another uncompleted story featured Pastor “Uncle Monte” Miller, who is trying to open a restaurant in downtown Muncie. His restaurant intends to use soul food to get people into the restaurant, while using live performances of soul music to convert them to Christianity.

In moving his restaurant downtown, Uncle Monte moved into a condemned building that once housed the Muncie YMCA. Though the restaurant was planned to be open before Easter of 2003, constant complications with construction and with the Mayor’s Office have delayed the opening.

The story on Uncle Monte is nearly finished, but needs the restaurant opening to be complete. I hoped to show the struggles of opening an African American business while highlighting the role of faith. Unfortunately, the restaurant is still not open and does not promise to be open any time soon.
Conclusion

In December of 2003, I donated 50 images to the Minnetrista Cultural Center. An exhibit was organized and hung in the museum from February through June 2004. Minnetrista has added the prints to its permanent collection and hopefully will continue to give them additional lives. A touring exhibition and a possible exhibit at the State Museum are in the planning phases.

I am still compiling audio interviews and creating slide shows for an online, multimedia version of the project. When complete, this presentation can be experienced at: http://www.bsu.edu/vbc/middletown and will be promoted in the book.

The project has grown beyond my expectations. Though I wished I could have photographed more, I am proud of the impact that the work has made. I want to thank all of the members of the African American community that accepted me, made me feel at home and made this project possible.
Sources of Inspiration


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