

Vanessa Barksdale Interview

The following is an interview conducted by my UMBC student Michael Stone for the UMBC collection on the Preserve Baltimore Uprising website.

Michael Stone: So, I have a list of questions and you can look at them with me, but I have a couple of things I want to ask you about. So, do you live in Baltimore City?

Vanessa Barksdale: In part. My parents are split up, so I spend half of my time with my mother, who lives in the county now, and half of my time with my father, who lives in the west side of the city.

Michael Stone: Ok, cool. Where in the west side?

Vanessa Barksdale: In a neighborhood called Park Heights. It's near a train station.

Michael Stone: Nice, so were you there at the time of the protests?

Vanessa Barksdale: Yes, I went to three, I think. Three protests.

Michael Stone: (0:55) How did you first learn about or hear about the death of Freddie Gray, and what was your experience hearing that?

Vanessa Barksdale: I have to think about that because I don't remember the moment.

Michael Stone: It doesn't have to be the exact. Maybe just around that time when this first hit the news and just around that time. just thinking about your experience.

Vanessa Barksdale: You know what, I don't remember when, but I do remember how that made me feel. And I do remember the visceral reaction if that's meaningful to you at all. I remember sitting down, (1:40) I remember my stomach just turning up into a complete knot and just thinking how wild it must be for someone to get in a police car and then within the course of the day to be completely damaged to the point where their entire spine is damaged and disrupted. And where you can hurt someone so much that you can crack all the bones in their body. Which is the wildest thing ever. Which is such a procedural thing that these things happen. You know what I mean? That's just the kind of thing they expect. And I was just—I don't know. It was really scary to me. (2:20) There was a lot of fear in my stomach. I don't know if there was anything else.

Michael Stone: Was that the first, well—what do you think it meant for Baltimore? The death of Freddie Gray?

Vanessa Barksdale: I think it meant for Baltimore City, for the people that live there, I think it was kinda a moment for them—for us—to say that someone needs to care at least about this because for something so violently horrible, unapologetically inhuman to happen to a single person, at some point we need to be able to say we can't accept this anymore, and for us to keep watching this happen over and over and over again to so many Freddie's and so many boys and to so many little girls and to have people's brothers not come home and to have people's sisters not come home and just to be afraid to walk outside and say "Oh, is there a policeman outside? Should I come back? What should I do? What should I wear?" I think people just got tired and just got really angry at the fact that they had to be scared every day when they walked out of the house.

Michael Stone: (3:40) So I think you said a little bit earlier that you were involved with three protests. Could you talk individually about each of those about where you marched, what you did, what was going on?

Vanessa Barksdale: (3:56) The first one was in the beginning of the protests when everything was happening. It was on a weekend. It was on a Friday, and it was just a bunch of people going through the streets, talking about how crazy everything was and how we needed to use our voices to fight back. And we marched past the Inner Harbor, around to where the jails are, which is a really long strip in Baltimore, and just around a couple neighborhoods. And I remember walking through there and seeing the policemen on the side of the streets we were marching on, and it was kinda like a "oh, we're not doing anything. We'll just let you guys do what you're doing." But it was kinda this eerie little shadow on the side of the road where you know if you move to the left or you move to the right you know something serious is about to happen. And I remember watching the marching down the street, knowing that I had to make a left because if I made a right down that street there were tanks guarding the other side of the road. And if I made that right and tried to walk past a tank then something really unfortunate probably would happen. So I was like well, it's really interesting, (5:15) I remember thinking how interesting it is and feeling like it was kinda like a scene out of the Hunger Games to feel like I'm walking down the street and these people are

nonverbally explaining to me, "You can go this way, Vanessa, but if you do, you may die." You know, I mean, because that's usually what you would expect when someone's using a tank or a gun strapped to their chest or something like that.

Michael Stone: How did it feel to see the army and tanks in a city that you grew up in? (5:45)

Vanessa Barksdale: It felt like an alternate universe. It felt like a different planet from a scifi movie where these things were--where a state like this exists. Where you just don't allow people to exist and move and be angry and feel their feelings. It was just a scene of--I've never felt like the state could be like, "we may kill you. We will kill you, Vanessa, if you move left. We can and do have the authorization to kill you." So that was just the wildest thing for me not to feel safe in my existence as a girl walking down the street.

Michael Stone: Then despite the fear that you experienced, you went to two more protests, so how was it different the second and the third time? What was different about that experience? What was different about the way you did that, or was anything different?

Vanessa Barksdale: Now the second time I went, now this may have been the second or third time I went, the protest was more of a celebration because the state's attorney decided that she was going to press charges. So everyone was running through the streets and they were rallying and we were so excited. And it was just a big community party. Like just marching down the streets. It was kinda like a parade. Everyone was--I remember me and my friends were walking through this one part of the procession where everyone was dancing, and they brought metal pots and steel drums and things like that. And we were all jamming to our little protest songs. It was like a "We did it" kind of thing. Like they're listening to what's finally--and even if they're not. Even if they're not listening in the sense that we're going to actually do something about this two years from now, three years from now, at this moment, we have what we need. So that's just kind of a "we can do this" family type of thing. So.

Michael Stone: So those, either the second or the third[00:08:02], some of those protests were more celebratory. The first one was the protest, the anger, the reaction. Did you have anything specific that you and the people around you were trying to accomplish? What were the kind of things that people were trying to accomplish? What were the kind of things people were talking about? And what were specifically your goals? [00:08:20]

Vanessa Barksdale: Specifically?

Michael Stone: Yeah, not precise. But just like generally, you know?

Vanessa Barksdale: Okay, well it's actually interesting because a lot of different organizations were asking for a lot of different things. For example, the People's Power Assembly, they came out with these 14 points that they were asking. Or it may not be 14, but it was a series of points that they were asking for. And they were asking for indictments of course, but they were asking for a lot of things. But a lot of organizations were just asking for more systematic stuff--more general police accountability, let's implement these body cameras, let's figure out how when an officer shoots someone and the end result of that is I'm gonna put you behind a desk for more 30 days, I'm going to make sure that you have to do more than just the requisite two pages of paperwork. You know what I mean? [00:09:23] It was just like a lot of people were asking for a lot of different things but at the end of the day we just want these people's lives to be accounted for. We want these people's experiences to be valid.

Michael Stone, "Vanessa Barksdale Interview," Preserve the Baltimore Uprising: Your Stories. Your Pictures. Your Stuff. Your History., accessed March 21, 2019, <https://baltimoreuprising2015.org/items/show/10571>.



Lionel Turner, "Rally at City Hall 2015.....," *Preserve the Baltimore Uprising: Your Stories. Your Pictures. Your Stuff. Your History.*, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://baltimoreuprising2015.org/items/show/9992>.