



Episode 014 – Human Relations and Fair Housing (transcript)

Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at burbankinfo.org.

Announcements

Professor George Dei remarked that "Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone." The Burbank Public Library constantly strives to make a space where everyone feels welcome, represented, and included. Our Book to Action program encourages all to join in a community-wide conversation. Our upcoming program focuses on mental health. The uncertain times we are in right now brings to the light the importance of caring for ourselves on all levels from physical, to mental, to emotional. We hope you'll join us in March to discuss *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* by Lori Gottlieb

Story

And now for today's story.

Until the recent civil unrest in our nation, many might have assumed racial tensions an issue of the 1960s. But this year has truly unmasked the countless inequalities that still pervade our society. There is a local group that has been fighting racism and social injustice since 1958, the Burbank Human Relations Council. This organization was an offshoot of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission which was formed in 1944 in response to the Zoot Suit Riots with their ultimate goal being to bring together "key players to resolve immediate intercultural conflicts and to work toward the longer term aim of eradicating bias and prejudice" (hrc.lacounty.gov). Unlike the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission which is government sponsored, the Burbank Human Relations Council is an all-volunteer, fully independent organization that relies on donations from its members and other local support. They heroically enter the scene when there is local need to examine prejudice, intolerance, and discrimination, specifically with regards to intergroup relations, housing, employment, and education.

The Burbank Human Relations Council formed after local citizens began to outcry against a car wash that had hired two black employees. The group hoped to quell fears, ease tensions, and bring about progressive change in the community. They held monthly meetings at the library and largely went unnoticed until 1963, when racial tensions were at their peak.

But first, let me share with you a bit of background history on what was happening at that time. In 1963, the California legislature passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act. The goal of this law was to end unfair discrimination against people of color who were seeking housing, which was a common occurrence at

the time. All too often, white landlords would not rent to people of color and white property owners refused to sell. The preamble of the Rumford Act stated that "the practice of discrimination because of race, color, religion, national origin, or ancestry is declared to be against public policy." It forbade discrimination on the sale, rental, lease or financing of housing and set up procedures for preventing and remedying violations. And why was this necessary? Because real estate agents and bankers began embedding racial covenants into home sale deeds more than a century ago. These covenants were legally enforceable contracts that indicated who could not occupy a residence, and the distinction was usually made along a racial divide. Then in the 1930s, the Federal Housing Administration was commissioned to make color coded maps of large U.S. cities breaking them down into four categories with green being the most desirable areas to own a home and red indicating a hazardous area to reside. This act is more commonly known as redlining. It was government sanctioned discrimination which has had such an insidious effect that we can still see evidence of it today. It permeated the entire structure of real estate. Decades ago, redlining caused de facto segregation and yet, many of those neighborhoods still harbor reputations as being undesirable to occupy.

So, back to 1963 Burbank: the Burbank Human Relations Council chose the Rumford Act as a topic of interest which ended up sparking a debate. A Valley Herald Times article read, "More than 300 persons jammed the auditorium and hallways of the Burbank Public Library last night to hear a local debate on the Rumford Act and the initiative to nullify it." Proponents for the act were Richard Hallmark, a West Covina realtor and chairman of the California Realtors for Fair Housing, and Ray Cormier, chairman of the Glendale-Burbank Interfaith Fair Housing Council. "Burbank Realtor Jack Thorpe and Norman Nelson, president of the Glendale Board of Realtors, spoke in favor of the initiative and against the Rumford Act." The debate was sponsored by the Burbank Human Relations Council, a strong supporter of the act. The article also stated "If audience reaction could be a gauge, Thorpe and Nelson 'won' the debate. Their remarks triggered loud applause several times, while Hallmark and Cormier often had to pause because of heckling and jeers." According to a 1960 census, Burbank had only 3% of its population made up of non-white people. There were 29 black residents and 273 other minorities in a population of more than 90,000. Burbankers of that time were remiss to make changes in their opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. This is not to single out Burbank, because it was a sentiment shared by Californians from all corners of the state. A majority of California home sellers were so opposed to progress of this nature that the California Real Estate Association wrote and lobbied for new legislation. It came in the form of Proposition 13 that nullified the Rumford Fair Housing Act, once again allowing property sellers, landlords and their agents to discriminate on ethnic grounds when selling, renting, or leasing. It passed with support from 65% of voters. "Political science research has tied white support for Proposition 13 to "racial threat theory", which holds that an increase in the racial minority population triggers a fearful and discriminatory response by the dominating racial majority." (Wikipedia.org/wiki/1964_California_Proposition_13)

Not long after Proposition 13 was passed, the federal government deemed it to be unconstitutional, and cut off all housing funds to California. Many suggest that the passing of Proposition 13 was one of the causes of the Watts Riots of 1965. It wouldn't be until a few years later, that the country saw a federal Fair Housing Act under the umbrella of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

Shortly after the Rumford housing debate, the Burbank Human Relations Council got ousted from meeting at the library. They had the support of the library director of the time, E. Perry Caswell stating, "I feel very strongly the library should be a clearing house for ideas, not only in its books, magazines, and

films but also for the meetings presented in the auditorium.” But the city council and city attorney thought otherwise and decided that it was in the city’s best interest to no longer make available the library auditorium for groups who they deemed as having political agendas. The ACLU stepped in to support the Burbank Human Relations Council and sued the city. Their claim was that the council was a cultural organization. The superior court decision held that the Burbank Human Relations Council did, in fact, qualify as a cultural group and under existing regulations could hold meetings in the auditorium. In response, the city council changed their rules governing use of the room to only include city-connected groups. These rules were observed until 1973 when then library director L. Kenneth Wilson brought the matter before the city council requesting the restrictions to be lifted.

So, you wonder, whatever happened to the Burbank Human Relations Council? They still exist and serve the community as a resource for advocacy when the need arises. In the 1970s, they worked to aid low-income families, including their recommendation for Head Start classes for underprivileged children. In the 1980s, they lobbied for more local subsidized housing. In the 1990s, they stood by Latino parents who voiced concerns about bilingual language practices in the schools. Just this past year, they drafted a resolution acknowledging Burbank’s history as a sundown town and successfully advocated to City Council for its passage. They are part of this community’s bedrock and they work constantly toward achieving growth and progress. They have helped navigate Burbank in its journey to be the diverse and inclusive city it is today.

News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today’s news comes from the February 10, 1964 *Burbank Daily Review*.

The author of the Rumford housing act used to shine shoes around the corner from the Goldwater family’s Phoenix, Arizona department store. Since those boyhood days in Phoenix, Rumford has exchanged his shoeshine stand for a prosperous drug store, the board chairmanship of a savings and loan association and University of California degrees in pharmacy and public administration. His housing law – banning discrimination in about 70 per cent of the state’s housing – has made him a statewide political figure. He has traveled all over California speaking against an initiative aimed at nullifying the controversial statute enacted by the 1963 legislature. Rumford went to Phoenix Union High School where black students were in an isolated building with only two teachers. His family was poor and they had to scramble to earn money. A \$5 a week drug store job in his senior year in high school convinced Rumford that he wanted to be a pharmacist. He came to California and worked his way through pharmacy school and tried to find a job. He said his color made it difficult. In 1943, he mortgaged his house and bought a drug store. Five years later he was elected to the Assembly, as Alameda County’s first black legislator. In Sacramento, he introduced the state’s Fair Employment Practices Act and other civil rights legislation. But he’s considered a moderate. Rumford and his family live in the heart of Berkeley’s black district, near his drug store. But he owns a lot in the city’s exclusive hill area and may build a home there one day.

And that’s the news from February 10, 1964.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfoocus.org

Thank you for joining us today.