



FINDING THE HOPEFUL ACTION IN BALTIMORE—AND TAKING IT

BY GRETCHEN SUSI

If the turmoil around race and policing against the backdrop of de facto segregated and often failing education, housing, and employment systems had not yet come to the forefront of the national consciousness, it certainly would have on April 27, 2015, when Baltimore erupted in tears, anger, and flames over the killing of Freddie Gray—another young black man dead at the hands of police. What started in 2012 with the killing of Trayvon Martin gained an uncanny momentum. The question of whether the United States was post-racial after President Obama’s 2008 election was answered with a sobering no.

For the Baltimore Aspen Workgroup—business, community, philanthropic, and religious leaders from the Baltimore region—the events of April hit hard. They were the realization of the workgroup’s worst fears. The workgroup first met in October 2011 at the Aspen Institute’s Wye River Campus, for one of the Roundtable on Community Change’s (RCC) Racial Equity and Society Seminars. The focus was on how Baltimore and the nation had come to their current state of racial inequity and how to promote racial equity going forward. The workgroup’s thirty-one members now meet under the auspices of the RCC in partnership with Associated Black Charities of Maryland and the Baltimore Community Foundation.

Our first premise is that the Baltimore region’s challenges require long-term collective action in policy, social, and institutional practices, and insight into cultural representations and belief systems. Our second premise is that it can be done.

A few days after things died down, Diane Bell-McKoy, workgroup member and CEO of the Associated Black Charities, was in Sandtown, one of the hardest-hit neighborhoods in terms of both unrest and long-term disinvestment. “I saw a small birthday party taking place outside,” she says. “Sixty percent of the block is vacant. A car that had been burning a few days before was in plain view of the children. The little girls looked to be seven or eight years old. They wore colorful party hats, and for as many years as I have been in Sandtown, those party hats on the little girls hit me so hard. It drove the point home to me once again that the people are not broken, but they are living in and responding to a very broken system.”

The workgroup’s first meeting after the unrest was intense and emotional. Members grappled with how best to contribute and agreed that trying to catalyze action by building greater awareness made the most sense. Even the best-educated Americans, regardless of race, often do not have an understanding of how policies and practices in housing, employment, and transportation created segregated communities across the United States. There is also not a common understanding of how stigmatization of people of color has perpetuated the system of policing and mass incarceration in which Freddie Gray’s death became an incendiary event.

On September 18, 2015, the workgroup launched the Time Is Now public-awareness campaign across local media. The campaign is slated to continue for at least a year, with a radio campaign, public events, and workshops for legislators and journalists. The campaign is having at least



some of its intended effects: *The New York Times* published a letter from the Baltimore Community Foundation's Tom Wilcox in which he named structural racism as at the root of Baltimore's current challenges; the University of Baltimore is offering a new course on structural racism in Baltimore, led by Provost Joe Wood, a workgroup member; *The Baltimore Sun* and WYPR gave recent coverage to the workgroup's public statement. It has garnered the interest of key decision-makers, both black and white.

"This is the first time in my memory that such a diverse group has been willing to stand in Baltimore and say, 'Structural racism is the problem,'" says Bishop Douglas Miles of Koinonia Baptist Church, a workgroup member. "It is a point of celebration. But we make a mistake just to have conversations. We need a listening campaign that draws together various segments of the community to listen to one another about the issues facing this city. We can talk for the next twenty years about structural racism, but nothing changes until people work together and solve problems together."

Michael Sarbanes, workgroup member and Baltimore City Public Schools teacher, puts it this way: "Once the honest discussion is happening and we have a clear-eyed analysis of the problem, we have to be prepared to answer the question—and it's not easy—'What do we do?' The challenge to all of us becomes taking the hopeful action. We want to keep people from thinking 'It's too big.' We want people to know that there are lots of positive things happening, and there's a role for everyone. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem."

Diane Bell-McKoy of Associated Black Charities of Maryland provides an example of being part of the solution: a Baltimore business owner who manufactures parts for airlines and the military and makes a point of hiring ex-offenders. "It is an intentional part of his operation to give them a pathway," she says. "When he learned of the scheduling challenges that many of them have in getting their lives back on track—especially things like meeting with a parole officer—he changed the work hours for that part of his shop. He made a five-day week a four-day week—longer days, but giving them a day off allows them to handle all of those issues. He will tell you that it is the most productive part of his organization. And he is trying to figure out how to do more of this."

As a new year approaches, the workgroup, too, is figuring out how to do more. As Bishop Miles put it, "Unless our campaign says, 'This is not unique to Baltimore,' then I think we miss a very meaningful opportunity." The Baltimore Aspen Workgroup's goal for the near future is to see that urgency so evident after Freddie Gray's death be sustained long enough to achieve real improvements. Baltimore is not alone in its legacy of structural racism. But it could be peerless in overcoming it.

Gretchen Susi is the director of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change.

FROM ASPEN FORUM TO PRESIDENTIAL SUMMIT

BY DAVID MONSMA

Powerful market forces of rapid innovation are driving change in the energy sector—and driving it toward a cleaner energy future. The Aspen Institute Energy and Environment Program helps guide this evolution with its Clean Energy Innovation Forum, which convenes every summer in Aspen. Now in its seventh year, the Forum reflects the increasing influence of clean-energy innovation and is now a premier gathering of government officials, industry leaders, entrepreneurs, and leading thinkers. This past July, the forum was populated with faces from not only some of the leading clean-energy companies but also leading technology companies, legacy utilities, major energy consumers, major financial institutions—and senior officials from the Obama administration.

The forum took on particular significance last summer, when many of the themes presented and discussed in July were highlighted a month later by President Obama in his remarks at the National Clean Energy Summit in Las Vegas. The president announced several new executive actions and private-sector commitments that will promote energy efficiency and accelerate the transition to cleaner sources of energy.

"The opportunity to engage in sustained nonpartisan conversation in Aspen at the Clean Energy Innovation Forum over the past few years," says Ali Zaidi, a longtime energy adviser to the Obama administration and Aspen forum participant, "has inspired new policy priorities of the administration, specific to how the country's energy system transforms to meet the needs of the future. These include grid infrastructure investments, expanded energy-efficiency standards, and new initiatives and partnerships to deploy distributed energy resources like micro-grids and rooftop-solar."

The transition to a cleaner-energy future will take on even greater significance in December, as leaders from more than 190 countries descend on Paris for the Climate Change Conference with the aim of achieving a legally binding and universal agreement on climate. The Obama administration's flagship climate-change solution, the Environmental Protection Agency's recently finalized Clean Power Plan, depends on the robust growth of clean energy and greater energy efficiency. Next summer's Clean Energy Innovation Forum, with its spectrum of diverse participants and expertise, will encourage and enable the new, collaborative, cross-disciplinary thinking that will be necessary to move progress forward in a post-Paris world.

David Monsma is the executive director of the Institute's Energy and Environment Program.