

Mr. Juan Gardner, Long Term Resident of Madison, Illinois; Principal of Madison Senior High School
Transcript of interview for the Madison Historical Society Oral History Project.
Interviewed by Don Daughrity, Madison Senior High School Social Studies Student
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SPEAKERS

Don Daughrity, Juan Gardner

Don Daughrity [DD]: 00:00 Ready?

Juan Gardner [JG]: 00:00 Uhm hmm!

DD: 00:03 This is Don Daughrity interviewing Mr., You want to state your name for the record?

JG: 00:06 Juan Gardner.

DD: 00:08 At Madison Senior High School, on February 28, 2023. Okay, Mr. Gardner, I have a couple of questions for you. When coming up how diverse was Madison?

JG: 00:21 The diversity of Madison, when I was coming up was very clear. You had the white part of town, and you had the Black part of town. However, being a student in Madison, when I was in sixth grade, it was something called (??????) 1972. Desegregation was a game changer, which meant now, the Black and white kids had to come to school together, and that we did. When I moved to, on to seventh grade, that's when we became, it wasn't sixth grade, it was seventh grade; we left the Old Dunbar West Madison area, the Old Newport, over on the side of town where West Madison, where you guys don't know anything about, because all the houses and communities torn down now. We had to be bused to Madison Junior High School, which was at Third and Alton Streets. It's a baseball field there now-- a softball field. So that's where I went to seventh and eighth grade and they were building what you know, as Long school. Long School used to be the Junior-Senior High School. It was the new junior-senior high school to replace the one that was built in 1900, at Third and Alton. So, the diversity was simply, at that time, it was probably about 50% white, 50%. Black; it was about 50-50. Does that answer your question?

DD: 01:47 It does. It does. So, prior to the year 2000, what were some of the hotspots that may or may not be around anymore?

JG: 01:55 The hotspots? Wow. Back in my time. Lee Park was the place to be...Lee Park, going down to the West Madison Memorial Center. Again, these were the places where Black kids went to go have fun and kick it; that we, like where you guys live on East Madison, we didn't come over here because

this was all white. And it wasn't anything personal, it was just that we were coming out of very racist, intense times and, the Venice Center was a place to hang out. And these are the kinds of things we did. We played sports. We played football, basketball, and baseball right there in the neighborhood, right in Lee Park. We went from one sport to the next sport. We had girls who were amazing. They were called the Madison Cools, Don. Madison Cools girls' softball, they were pretty, and they were, they were athletic, and they used to go around the St. Louis area, beating down girls with softball, they were good. And some of those ladies have relatives including, you would know, Elijah Williams, Isaiah Williams, his grandmother. I saw actually, not the grandmother, but their, their mother's cousin Niecy. They owned Tastee Freeze, John's Drive In over there across the viaduct. Well, she was a heck of a base, softball player. So, they were... there are really, really, some really rich memories. But those are places we hung out.

DD: 03:27 Okay, nice to know, nice to know, that athletics run in the family. Okay, so next up, what's your history with the city and county of Madison?

JG: 03:36 My history with the city and county of Madison goes right back to my parents. My mother and father were born in Madison. My mother lived on this place called Kerr Island. Her mother was a homemaker. She cleaned houses of white folk in St. Louis, and she saved money. She also worked at a laundromat. She only had one daughter and she said, "my daughter is going to go to college one day." My grandmother saved 50 cents a week. My mother was born in 1921. And she educated her. She's able to go to Illinois State University, Kansas City, Kansas for nursing, and later to Minnesota where she was the only Black person up there in nurse anesthesiology. So, my mother is very, very much so heralded as being the first African American nurse anesthetist. She made long paper--- nice money, at Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, even though we lived in Madison, that's what she did. My daddy was born and raised across the street from old Dunbar High School. Dunbar High School in West Madison is like, in old minds, it was like the jewel, it was the Mecca. It was like Howard University as a place to be. It was a kindergarten through 12th grade school. So my family is intricately tied to the area. So, I'm sharing all that to say that my dad was triple promoted, went to college when he was 15 years old, he went to SIU Carbondale. After he got out of there, he ended up working for the conservation camps down in Southern Illinois. He had a love for forestry and for travel and for, he gave that to my siblings and I. So, we love to travel, we always did. He took us West and to the East Coast when we were here, and people looked up to us. What is the Madison connection to Gardner? Well, not me, but my parents were legendary in Madison. Well known. My dad was also the Venice city treasurer. He was even a teacher in Madison District for 40 years. Today would have been, wow! Today would have been my daddy's 103rd birthday. He lived to be 88 years old. And that's a picture of him right over there, son. He was born and bred here, in Madison. He was also the originator of the Trojan Flashes newspaper. My dad was a sponsor, he kicked it off here. So, forty years in the district, 18 years of the same building, where in effect his classroom was Miss Hesty's classroom, downstairs room 118. He was the Venice city treasurer. He owned a laundromat; he had a barbecue grill. And people looked up to my family. Also, he had Gardner Tax Services; he prepared taxes. So, my family is well known in legend and lore of folk who were raised here. And on my mother's 101st birthday they renamed Miradosa Street after my parents. Miradosa Street is now named Gardner Avenue. So, when you say what's our connection, that's local connection. And in the county, my mom and dad, well, were very well respected African American folk. Back in the day, my parents were married in the year 1951. They lived

a very long life together, with dad passing away at 88... in 2008. They were married, all those years in between, and my siblings and I are grateful for their sacrifice. For me, my giving back. I graduated from here in 1978. I returned here, Don, almost seven years ago. And I want to make an impact here. I played sports. I was in the band here at Madison. I was a boy scout. I sang, I love singing. I was in the choir here at Madison High School. I was known as "Mister School Spirit." I had "Mister School Spirit." I had "Most Reliable" by my name in the yearbook. And I had a very good run here in Madison. And now, the last seven years, giving back son, that's my thing. Giving back, helping young people be in a mindset to aspire and travel the world. There's a world beyond Madison High School. It's a reason why I have posters in my office and even on my map. I have places around the world. I begin to say, "look, I grew up in Madison so did you, why can't you go to South Africa?" "Why can't you go to Beijing, China? Why can't you go to Switzerland? Why can't you go to Hawaii? Why can't you go to Oxford, London"-- Oxford University where my wife and I have done a joint; my wife is a professor, and we did a joint seminar while we were in Oxford, England and Oxford University. If I can do these things, you can too. That is my mantra. That is where my heart is. Because you guys every day, I see the brilliance in the hallways. I see you like many people told me, "Gardner you're gonna be something one day, you can't see it now, but I see greatness in you." Likewise, my students here at Madison and particularly you, Mr. Student Council President, you have greatness all over you. You're going to do great things.

DD: 08:54 Thank you. Thank you. Nice to know that your family has a history in Madison and that you would like to contribute back to the community. If you could give me a quick rundown about the people, city, and county of Madison as if I were a tourist, what would you say?

JG: 09:10 Currently, as a tourist, we have a mayor, Jon Hamm, who is legendary in this area. He has done a lot of great things for the city of Madison in terms of upgrades, from infrastructure that is, like right now. Our streets are torn up and they're putting in, new plumbing, piping, because they're years and years-decades old, to improve things. Mayor Hamm also has a big thing about taking away abandoned houses and knocking them down, making sure that no one can be injured, or any kind of violence can happen in these places. The political stratosphere in Madison is such that, and all, used to be an all-white aldermanic board in Madison. Madison is now predominantly African American, I would say it's probably some 70% Black, 30% white. And the constitution of the Madison City Council is predominantly Black now. The mayor's white, Jon Hamm, but he does his best to work along with the needs of the people. There's a lot of work to do in a small town, we only have about 2000 people here. But Don, when I was kid here, Madison, at one point, had 10,000 people. And before my watch, that was a time Madison had almost 20,000 people here, way back in the 1940s and 50s. And if you were to walk through the hallways, you would see how things change--was all white. From the time Madison was in... the high school started in 1915. But the pictures you see downstairs pick up in 1940. And it was all-white up until desegregation occurred. But there were a handful of blacks, including Don Freeman, one of our, one of our greats. He was just brought into the St. Louis Sports Hall of Fame. He was inshrined, and I had a chance to be there with some Madison folk. It was just wonderful talking about the good old days, but the politics of Madison are such that only 2,000 people, people who run for office, often win because they have a strong family, strong family numbers and they get them to the polls. Black people by and large, don't come out to the polls and last mayoral election, only 800 of the 2,000 residents voted. And that is less than 50%. And that's not a good thing. So that's it. That is the political stratosphere, the way I see it. Yeah.

DD: 11:53 Okay. Nice to know. Thank you for the rundown. If I was curious, I would most definitely check out Madison. Growing up and going to school in Madison, what influenced you the most?

JG: 12:06 My parents were amazing. My parents had this way, Don, of demanding excellence without telling you. It was an expectation, and you knew it. It was subtle. "You must bring straight A's home; you must bring all Bs home." They never said that, because of my siblings--my older siblings, because I'm the youngest. They were doing it all the time. Also, I had role models. My, my older siblings' friends, they were great. They were great students. They were great athletes, and I wanted to be like them. I had people I can look up to Don in the community. There were also teachers who lived across the street. Teachers who lived in the community. I had teachers who were my influence because I saw them outside of school, in the grocery store, at the barbershop. And my church family, Mount Nebo Missionary Baptist Church. I grew up, born and raised there. I had tremendous opportunities and leadership. They put me as a young person, you did, we did Christmas and Easter speeches. And you were in plays. So, there was always a microphone in front of me. And I always had opportunity because people saw again, "Juan Gardner, I see something great in you, here, we're going to give you this." Don, I'd be scared out of my mind sometimes in front of older people, but especially when my friends like people my age, you know, you get little, you get a little queasy about speaking in front of kids because you're concerned about how they're gonna think about you and all that. And they come back say "hey, man, that was good, man. Man, that was good." So it encouraged me. So my influences were my parents, church, role models in the community. Some of my coaches, in fact, Mr. Dave Hodges is one of my key mentors. He's 82 years old, still living, he was a history teacher at Madison. And he was also an assistant basketball coach on our very first state championship team in 1977. So, I've been like Uber, Uber blessed to have been around people who poured into me.

DD: 14:21 Okay, thank you, Mr. Gardner, for making time in your busy schedule to answer this interview. It's nice to know all your influences and what led you to be the person you are today. Again, this is Don Daugherty with Mr. Juan Gardner of Madison Senior High School and I'm signing out.