

ZEPHYRHILLS ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Molly Moorhead

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- Jon [West]: Tell me your name and what your relationship was to [the Martin Luther King street renaming] incident.
- Molly: I'm Molly Moorhead, and I was a reporter at the—it was called the *St. Petersburg Times* then. It's now the *Tampa Bay Times*. I started there in 2002 and left in the beginning of 2019, but from around 2002, when I started, until 2005 or so, I covered local government in the cities in Pasco County, including Zephyrhills. That was my main coverage area. I wrote about the city council meetings. I wrote about events that happened there: crimes, but also government events and certainly everything that happened in City Hall.
- Jon: So this was fairly early on into your coverage of Pasco County?
- Molly: It was, yes. I was a very young, new reporter. When I started at the *Times*, I had worked at a couple of other newspapers, but on the editing side. So, when I came to the *Times*, they kind of threw me into the deep end—the deep end being local government in Pasco County [*laughs*]. I had my own beat: the city of Zephyrhills. It was considered a kind of training-level beat. You never know what can happen anywhere at any time in the news, but it wasn't like a hot bed.
- Jon: So, in relation to the Martin Luther King Street renaming in Zephyrhills, can you describe what happened surrounding that decision by City Hall? Maybe even a little bit of a lead up to that?
- Molly: Well, the crazy thing about it is that there wasn't really much of a lead up. As I recall, a woman named Irene Dobson, who was a senior citizen in Zephyrhills, a black woman who'd lived there for many decades, basically requested that the city rename Sixth Avenue after Martin Luther King, Jr. Mrs. Dobson lived in a kind of black enclave off of Sixth Avenue, and the black neighborhood in Zephyrhills is literally on the other side of the railroad tracks, outside the city limits, but, of course, it's all considered Zephyrhills. So, she wrote a letter to the city requesting this street renaming, just to honor the civil rights leader. I can remember the day that I went to City Hall to pick up the agenda packet for the city council meeting, which is what I did every other week before the meeting. The city manager, Steve Spina, would usually go over the agenda with me, and I could ask him whatever I wanted. I was just looking for newsworthy things, and I spotted this on there. He said something like, "Yeah, Mrs. Dobson wrote a letter asking for it, and I think it's a great idea." I went back to my office and told my editor about it, and she said, "Oh, get ready. This kind of thing always stirs up some controversy." That said, I

don't think any of us saw what was coming. I don't think any of us thought it would be still making news six months later.

Jon: So then what happened?

Molly: Well, the night of the meeting comes along, and one of the least memorable things about it is probably that meeting, because the storm had not grown by then. I'm sure that Mrs. Dobson was at the meeting and probably spoke about what a nice thing this would be—a nice gesture to the black community. And it passed. I don't really remember what the vote was, but it takes two votes, so it passed [this vote] and then it was going to have to come back for a second vote. That's when people started to become more aware of it. It was in the paper, and the city also sent a letter to all of the property owners on the street. I think that letter got to people either right before that first vote or right after it, but, anyway, it was in time for the second city council meeting, which is when things really started to heat up. By that time, you had some angry residents, particularly residents of the street, who didn't want their own street renamed. It just kind of came out of nowhere for them. I remember people saying, "I don't want to have to write out Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue every time I put my return address on an envelope." They didn't like that they felt so blindsided by it. They didn't like that there wasn't more of a process, that it was just sort of one person asked for this and they said "okay," and nobody really had much say in it. What became clear quickly, though, is that there was a racial element to it, and virtually all the people who were opposed to the street renaming were white and the people who wanted it were black. That was impossible to ignore. It was impossible not to see that, and as the controversy dragged on the, the racist sentiments around it—and I feel comfortable saying there were definitely racist opinions—became grouped in with the people who were just frustrated, who felt like their city council didn't listen to them. They were all on the side of opposing street renaming. For the people who wanted it, they were seeing and hearing a lot of really hurtful things being said. So, it passed again on the second vote, it became final, and that by no means killed the controversy. Things kept happening that kept the emotions hot. Like when the street signs went up and the old Sixth Avenue signs came down: that was another thing that upset people. This was in the fall of 2003, so now it's the end of the year and city elections are in March. Pretty quickly, people started talking about first recalling the council members who had voted for the name change, and I think that kind of fizzled, but then some people started to pledge to run for office, promising to overturn the name change. One of those people got elected, and she was very clear: she was a resident of the street, and she felt like the city council had just flat-out ignored what the residents wanted, and that was unacceptable from her city government. She campaigned very hard on that issue. She was a political novice, but she handled herself very well. She was very well-spoken and confident and ran a great campaign, and she was elected. The very first thing she did was to fulfill her campaign promise to overturn the name change, so she put it on the next agenda. I'm sorry, I can't remember the way the votes broke down, but I think the first vote back in the fall was like four to one in favor. So the one council member who had voted against it at the time, of course, was on the side of recalling the name change, and a couple others flipped, so it got reversed again. It takes two votes to make it final. That's when you saw the *New York Times* come to town and the TV stations. There was a white nationalist website that got a hold of the story, and they were posting really incendiary things.

There were people picketing at City Hall. It kind of overtook the town, but the name change was a foregone conclusion. Then they had the final vote. By then, there was a little bit of compromising going on, a little bit of people working together. In the final vote, they decided to recall the name change and put it back to Sixth Avenue, but leave the Martin Luther King signs up, sort of symbolic.

Jon: Okay. Who were the major characters that you remember being involved in this, especially on the side of being for the street renaming? Can you describe who those people were?

Molly: Irene Dobson was the woman who brought this idea up, and I think she just thought it would be a nice thing for her city to have some kind of memorial named after King, like hundreds of cities around the country. I don't recall ever asking her, where did you get this idea? I just think she wanted it to be in her city, because it's in so many cities. She got a lot of support right away, and there were some pastors from the town who helped her and supported her, and she had a lot of support in City Hall. The city manager was a friend of hers and a majority of the council at the time thought it was a great idea. This is a southern town that has its own history of racial tension, but they had come a long way, and I think people thought, why shouldn't we honor Dr. King? So, Mrs. Dobson was the one who got it all started and she had a lot of supporters behind her, but none were really the face of it the way that she was. The city manager, Steve Spina, he took on a pretty prominent role in all of this, just because there was so much heat on City Hall. He gave a very impassioned speech the night of the final vote about places that had a really ugly racial history, and I can remember him saying, "Please don't put Zephyrhills on that list by overturning this name change." So Steve had a big part in it, and Gina King, who was elected on the platform of promising to overturn the name change, was certainly a major player, and she won. I would say that those are kind of the main people.

Jon: After this whole incident, what kind of emotions do you remember being expressed by the black community?

Molly: I think there was some despair. I think they felt like whatever progress had been made maybe wasn't real. Maybe it was just kind of a cover for still a lot of tension beneath the surface. Not that the final vote was really ever in doubt. I think we all kind of knew how it was gonna go, but, when it really happened, people were just deflated that it really did come to pass, that it had grown to this huge, ugly fight that really exposed a lot of ugliness in the town, and this is how it ended. I will say, though, there was a little bit of positive. There was a group that formed right in the midst of this that met weekly, and there were black people and white people in it, and it was specifically about getting people together to talk to each other and to not let that tension and that division continue to rip the town apart. I remember writing a story about two people who were on opposite sides of this. One was a white man who lived on Sixth Avenue, and one was a black woman who got very involved in supporting the name change. They spoke at the same city council meeting and went out into the lobby just to kind of catch their breath, and they started talking to each other, and it was one of those authentic conversations that can show that healing can happen.

Jon: When you first started covering Zephyrhills and Zephyrhills government, what was your impression of the town, and how did this incident color that impression moving forward? Did it change your impression of Zephyrhills at all?

Molly: Well, I think that I learned about some complexity in Zephyrhills that I didn't know was there. I mean, Zephyrhills is a snowbird town. The population swells in the winter with lots of folks from up north coming to second homes and mobile home parks all around the city. It's just far enough north of Tampa to not be a suburb of Tampa, but it really is a small town. At the time, we were right before the big real estate boom, so there was a lot of development happening, and that was probably the biggest thing they were dealing with in city government: how to manage the development and how to control sprawl, but, at the same time, they wanted to grow. It was a small town, and it needed to grow. It had a high school and elementary schools and middle schools and lots of families. It's just a small town in Florida. Since whatever the prior big racial incident was decades before, I don't think this kind of thing had floated to the surface in quite a long time.

Jon: Yeah, you mentioned that the New York Times had come to town, and not only that, but we've uncovered things about Jay Leno covering it in his monologue—all sorts of things. It was kind of being covered on that national scale. What did you think of that? Did that surprise you that there was so much attention being focused on this?

Molly: I guess as the story continued to evolve and even grow, it didn't really shock me that the national press started paying attention, because it really was quite rare for a community to decide to rename something after a civil rights leader, specifically after Dr. King, and then take it back. These things always generate some controversy. A lot of times, there will be one proposal, and enough people are opposed to it that they'll settle on a compromise proposal. You know, maybe they want to rename a park, and they end up putting up a statue. But to completely reverse themselves was pretty unusual, so it was a heck of a story. It just said a lot about where we were as a country, as a state, where things were in the south, on making progress between blacks and whites.

Jon: Look at it almost as an outside observer, like maybe somebody who is reading the *New York Times*, and they're in a different part of the country. How do you think this reflected on the community? What do they think about Zephyrhills based on reading that?

Molly: My impression was that the opponents of the name change, while they had legitimate complaints about the city council kind of railroading it through, not getting enough community input...I think those things were legitimate, but, to an outsider, it was hard to separate it from the more racially motivated: "I don't want to live on a street named for Martin Luther King." You had arguments that it was going to hurt property values, and there's really not any factual basis for that. It may be an assumption that people make, but the valid concerns, I think, got folded in with the uglier stuff.

Jon: How much longer did you cover city government after this?

Molly: A couple of years. I kept covering Zephyrhills for awhile, and then I covered Dade City, which is up the road, so I was in Pasco County for a long time. Then I went over to West Pasco and covered the Sheriff's office and the courts, and those were sort of countywide beats. I kept one eye on what was happening in Zephyrhills, but it did quiet down after that happened. People went back to their lives.

Jon: Right. I'd imagine, too, that when you're on a beat like that, you may even look at what some other people in other areas of the country are doing, you know, the way they're writing about government, doing coverage. Have you ever seen or heard of any controversy that reached the level this did?

Molly: I don't think I ever saw anything specific to Dr. King, because I remember feeling like there are a lot of racial issues that are very controversial, but Martin Luther King seemed less so. They weren't renaming the street for Malcolm X, you know? That really surprised me, that people would oppose something named for Martin Luther King as strongly as they did, and I don't think I've seen anything quite as fiery ever since.

Jon: You mentioned briefly that Zephyrhills was like a microcosm of the country at large, and that's part of the interest in the story. What about today? Fifteen years later, does it have any relevance to our country today? Is there anything we can learn from this down the road?

Molly: Well, when I think about what it's like right now in 2019, the rhetoric in this country is so toxic, starting with our politics and seeping into everything else. There's a study in contrast of this kind of open, racially-charged dialogue, and even a lot of comments that are insulting to women and insulting to all minorities. It's very out in the open. Back in 2003, this was under the surface and the, the street renaming incident brought it out into the open. But today, it feels almost quaint to think about how upset people got when now you look at Twitter and you see stuff like this just as a matter of routine. So the fact that Zephyrhills, I think, really did recover from this—that's not to say that there aren't people who still have hurt feelings. I'm sure that's true, but I think by and large the community recovered—maybe we can all learn a little bit from that, that it's possible to move on from this kind of thing.

Jon: Just to make sure we have it clearly, how long did you cover the story?

Molly: I was looking at the dates. Mrs. Dobson brought it to the council in October of 2003, and the reversal of the name change became final in May of 2004.

Jon: That sounds like a pretty long ordeal.

Molly: Yeah. For a street renaming in a small town? Yeah.

Jon: Yeah. Well, that's a good point. How many City Hall things did you see where it was almost going through the motions to get something done, and how many did you see that were like this, where it was such a long saga?

Molly: I mean, anything that takes this long in city government normally involves money, you know? It's a project they're trying to do, and they don't have money, or it goes over budget, or, you know, they need a new fire station, and they only have half the funds, they're trying to get a grant—that's the kind of stuff that drags on in city government, not emotional issues like this.

Jon: Do you think there's anything that we missed? Any other comments? Anything we didn't ask you about?

Molly: Nothing's coming to mind. The main thing I wanted to say, and I hope this came across, is that I do feel like, in the opposition, there were people who just felt sort of picked on. Like, I've lived on this street for X number of years, and what the heck? I just got a letter in the mail and you've renamed my street. What was so sad is that it all got lumped in with stormfront.org, that was just this blatantly racist website. I just want to be sure that that came across about the opposition side. To be fair, I think there was a very broad lack of sensitivity among the opponents for how painful this was for people who wanted this name change, who wanted their community to recognize a civil rights icon, to make this gesture for the black residents. It was truly painful for them to watch people get up and just kind of rip it all to shreds, and then see the city council going along with it. So there was pain on both sides, and there was not enough listening going on, on both sides.

Jon: When I was researching, there was actually an academic paper that was written not by Steve, but by somebody else writing on this subject, and he was amazed that nobody would explicitly acknowledge the racial element of the thing, whether people were actually being racist or not, because of the clear division between white and black on each side of it. Nobody would say the obvious.

Molly: Yeah, and yet it was so impossible to ignore.

Jon: Yeah. Yeah. It was kind of like, okay, can we talk about the elephant in the room? And nobody seemed willing to have that conversation.

Molly: That's true. And that group that formed at the end, they did try to at least start that dialogue and acknowledge like, man, we've got a problem.

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