

# Ruby's lost childhood

Scholarly sources:

Urban Anthropology Inc. (2004). *Oral history of Milwaukee's African Americans*. Milwaukee: Urban Anthropology Inc.

Urban Anthropology Inc. (2007). *Oral history of Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood*. Milwaukee: Urban Anthropology Inc.

# Meet Ruby

Ruby Carter was a nineteen-year-old girl living in Milwaukee in August of 1968. This should have been a wonderful summer for Ruby, but she was facing one more hurdle in her lost childhood.

Did you say 'lost childhood'? How did Ruby lose her childhood?

Read on.

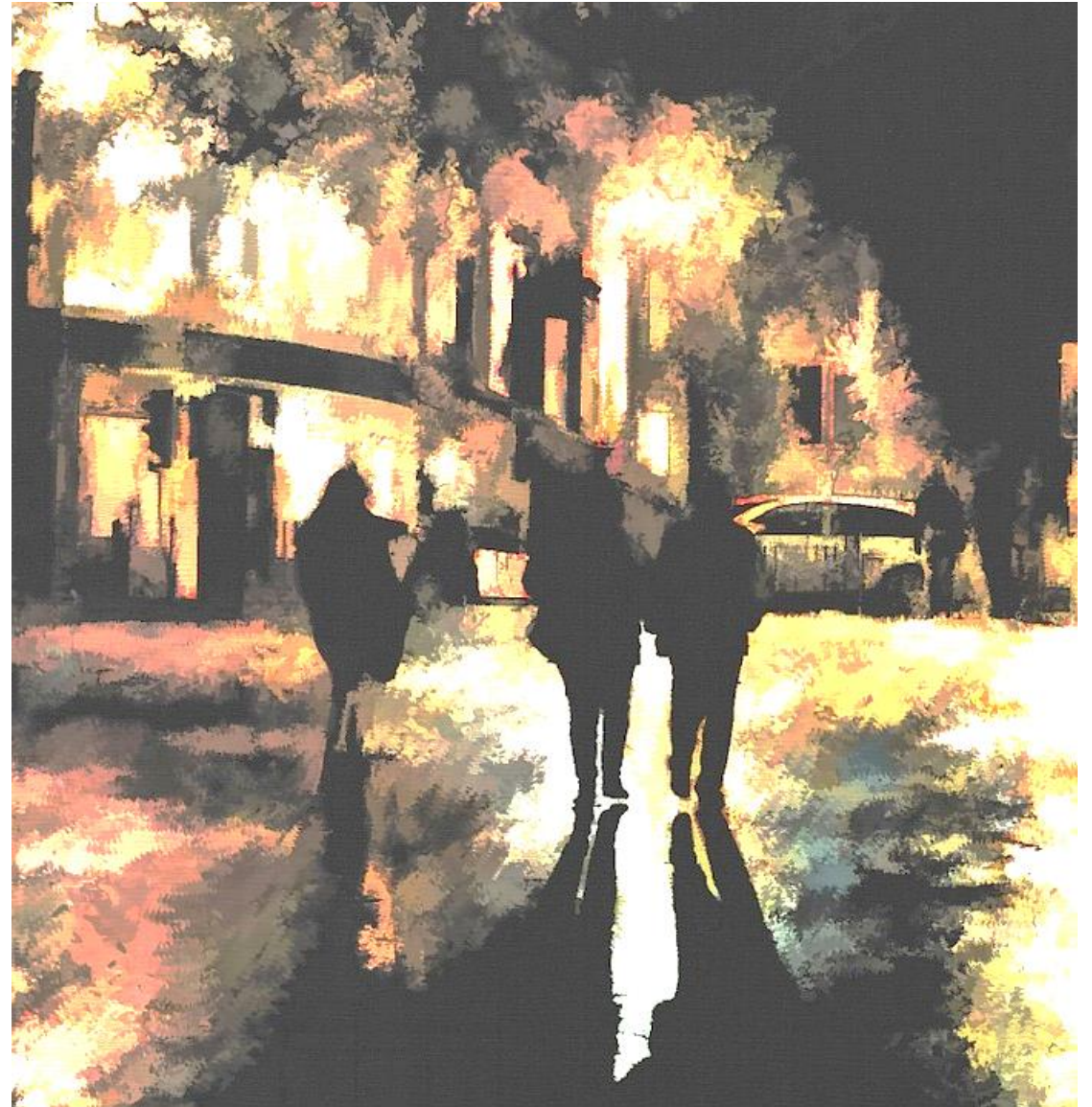


## Ruby's lost childhood

Ruby's childhood started out normal enough. She was the second child of Charles and Andrea Carter. Ruby's sister was much older and had been married and living in Chicago for as long as she could remember. So Ruby was almost an only child.



Ruby's family lived in an area they called Bronzeville. Bronzeville was just north of downtown in Milwaukee. It was a friendly community where neighbors knew each other and watched out for each other's kids.



When she was about six-years-old, Ruby remembered being very happy. She and her family were active in the local church. Her mother headed up a women's craft club where they made dolls for the Holiday Folk Fair that was held every year in Milwaukee. Many made raggedy Ann and Andy dolls.



Ruby had lots of friends in the neighborhood—*younger, same age, and older.*



One of her friends was a Jewish girl named Leah Silverberg. There was a Jewish Orthodox synagogue in Bronzeville called Beth Jehudah.

Leah and Ruby shared information about their cultures. Leah showed Ruby how her family observed certain holidays like Passover and Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year).



Ruby taught Leah some of the songs that her family had brought up from the South. One was about freedom from slavery. It went:

Mamy don't yo' cook no mo',  
Yo' ar' free, yo' ar' free.  
Rooster don't yo' crow no mo',  
Yo' ar' free, yo' ar' free.  
Ol' hen, don't yo' lay no mo' eggs,  
Yo' free, yo' free.





But by the time Ruby was seven her family began to hear rumors that her community was going to be torn down to build a freeway.

If the rumors were true it wouldn't just mean that they'd lose their home. Ruby's father also had a barber shop (and all his customers) in Bronzeville.



Pretty soon everyone got notices in the mail that the City of Milwaukee was taking their properties. Even the Jewish synagogue had to move.

Within a few short years the government had taken over 8,000 homes. Bronzeville, its people, its organizations, and its businesses completely disappeared.



While the government gave the Carters a small amount of money for their home, they had also taken the property where Mr. Carter's barber shop had been.

With no work available to them and no place to go, Charles and Andrea Carter were forced to take jobs as servants for a family living in a huge house on Milwaukee's upper east side. The home owner gave them a room in the basement where they would live.



Ruby had to go and stay with her older sister and her family in downtown Chicago. She went to school there and helped to earn her keep by caring for her younger nieces and nephews.



But by the time Ruby was ten her sister could no longer afford to keep her. Ruby was sent to live with a great aunt in Mississippi.

In Mississippi, she went to a small country school that she learned later was not accredited.



When Ruby was not in school, she would have to help her great aunt's family in the swampy fields. The family didn't own their own land. It was rented from a white farmer.

There was never any time for young Ruby to be with friends or play.

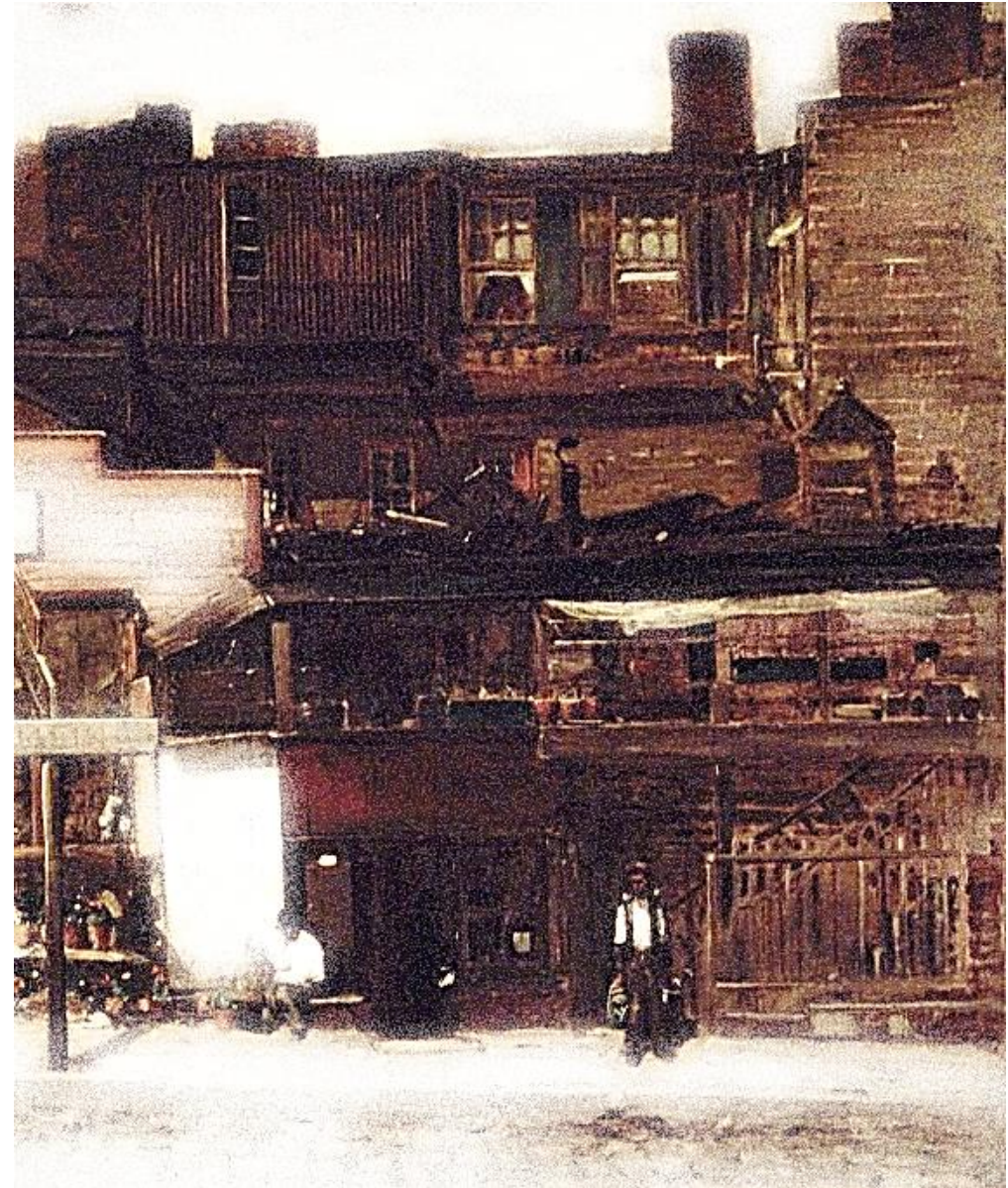


Back in Milwaukee, Ruby's parents kept trying to leave their jobs as household servants. It was so hard because even if Charles could get a job, they could find no apartment to rent. In those days white folks in Milwaukee would rarely rent to blacks and banks would not give them home loans. Unfortunately, there were no laws to change any of this.

The Carters just kept saving their money.

Finally, in 1966, Charles and Andrea were able to get a dingy little flat to rent in a slum neighborhood. Charles went to work as a building janitor and kept saving his money.

The Carters sent for Ruby.



Ruby was so happy to be back with her parents that she hardly noticed the awful housing conditions.

But Ruby was in for a terrible shock when she enrolled in the local high school. For the first time she found out that the school she'd been attending in Mississippi was not accredited. None of her coursework transferred into the new school. She had to retake everything. This meant that she was doing double schoolwork.

And again Ruby had no time for play.





Then one day, about a year after she'd moved back, a man came to her school and began talking about marches. He urged the high schoolers to join the Youth Council of the NAACP (National Association of Colored People). The Youth Council would be marching all summer to get a fair housing law passed so blacks could rent or buy homes anywhere in the city. Would she participate?

Ruby had to go to summer school to make up her coursework and knew she'd only have a few hours free each day. But she also knew how important it was to get that law passed. She eventually agreed.



So all summer and into the fall the Youth Council marched for fair housing with the adults and an activist priest named James Groppi. They marched for over 200 days. They even planned to march over the viaduct that separated Milwaukee's north side from the very white south side.



One destination of the south side marches was Kosciuszko Park on Lincoln Avenue. It was the area where blacks had the greatest difficulty getting housing.

This was the most dangerous march. All the way to the park, white people followed them, taunting them with racial threats and throwing stones and fruit and bricks at them.

But they made it.



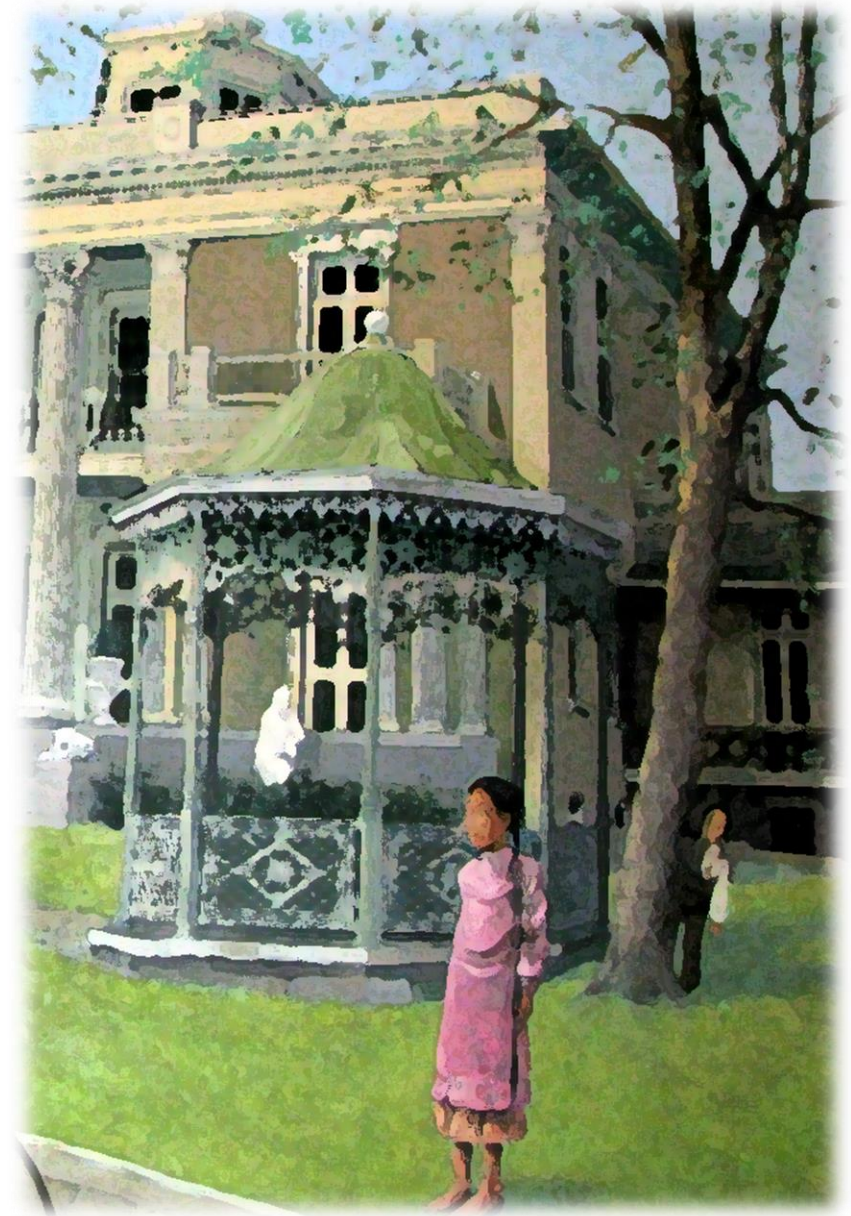
Their efforts paid off. Within a year the City of Milwaukee passed a fair housing law at City Hall. Now African Americans could live anywhere in the city that they wished.



And it was just months later that Ruby's parents heard from their old friends, the Coggs family. The Coggs knew they were looking for decent housing and had saved a lot of money. Old Theodor Coggs gave them a lead on a great deal on a gorgeous home in the nice Sherman Park neighborhood. Were they interested?

Oh yes!

Ruby shrieked when she saw her new home.



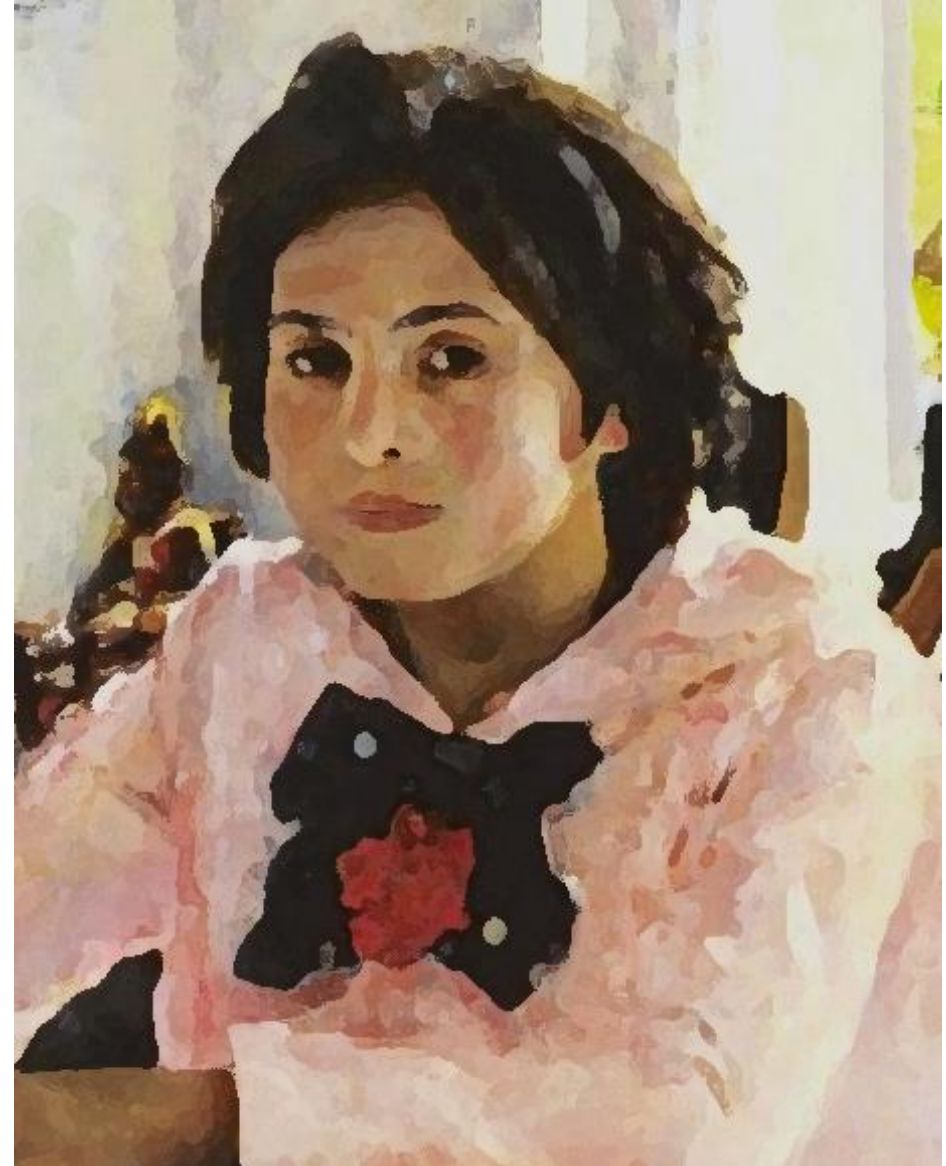
But Ruby had something else to be excited about. As soon as the family moved in, she ran into groups of her old friends that she'd once played with in Bronzeville.



And guess who else she ran into? Her old friend Leah Silverberg! When Leah's synagogue and its congregation left Bronzeville they'd eventually moved to Sherman Park too!

Ruby was sooooo happy. She would finally graduate from high school at the end of this summer (only a little over a year late) and she'd finally have friends again. For the first time since she was about six, she'd have fun.

But something else was about to call her name.



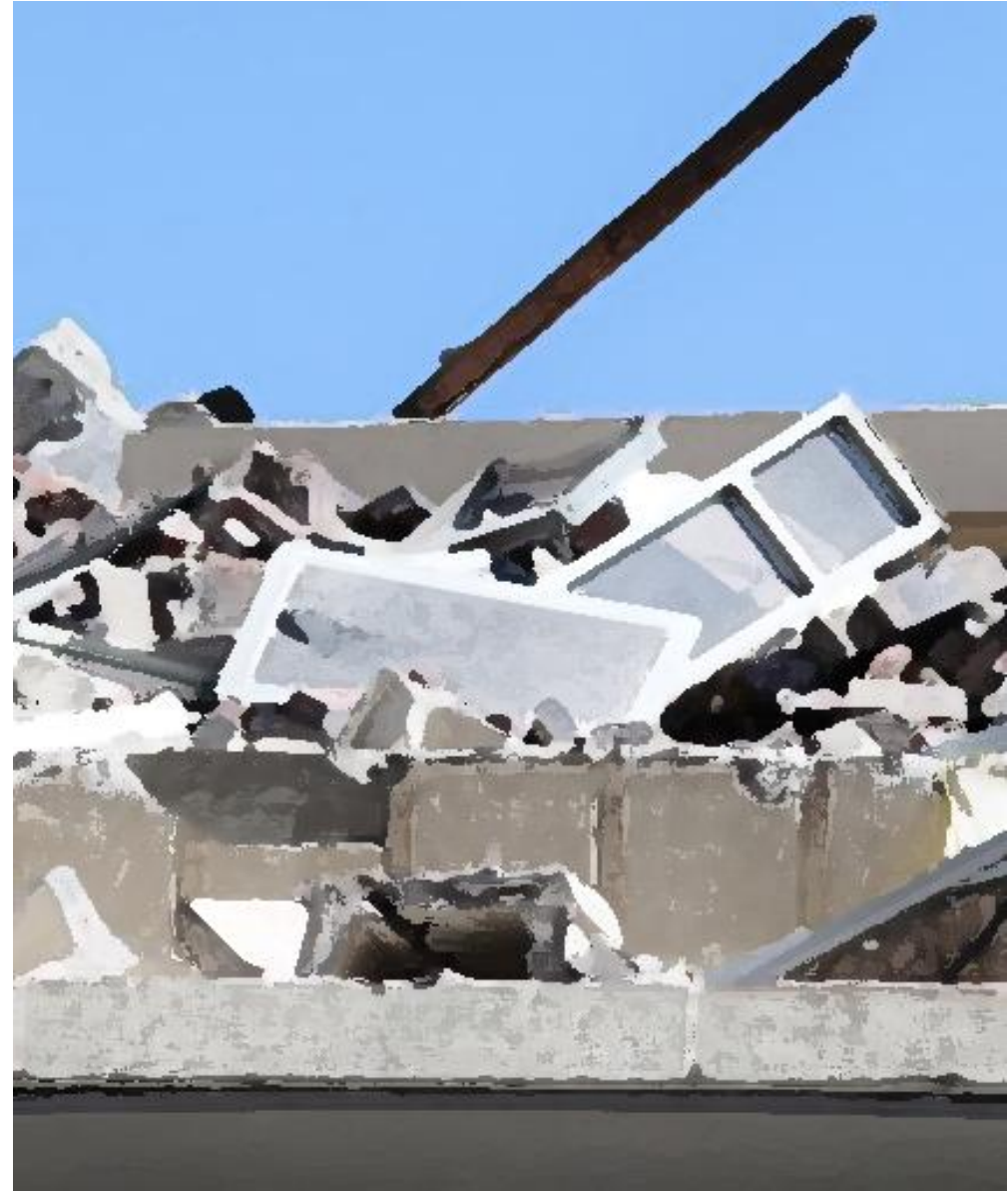
That something else was a freeway—again. The family had just settled into their new home when they got the news that the city was going to be tearing down much of the Sherman Park neighborhood to build yet another freeway.

How the Carters hoped and prayed it was not true.





But it was. By summer some of Ruby's old friends had gotten notices that their homes would be torn down. The Carters did not yet know if their home was next.

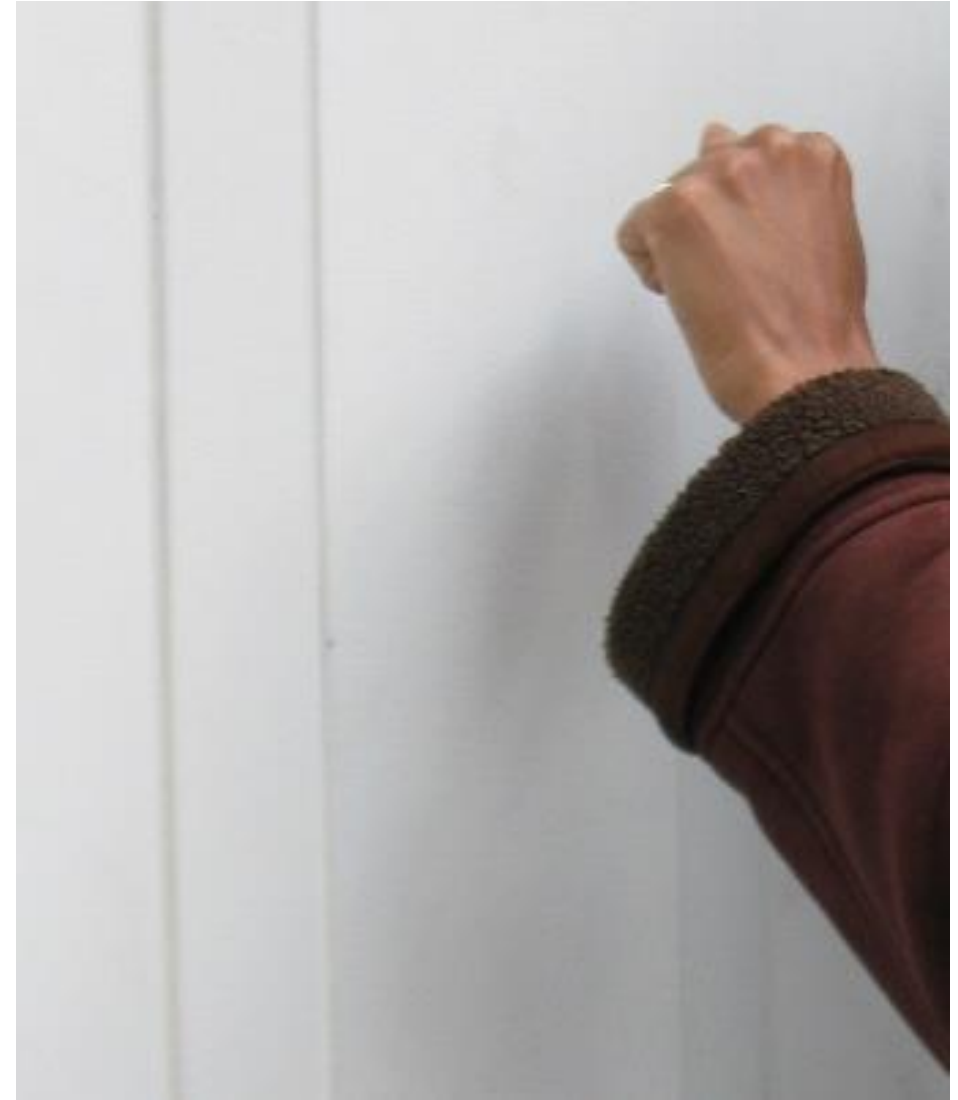


## August of 1968

Then in August, a group of people from St. Catherine's Church knocked at Ruby's door.

"I heard that you were one of the fair housing marchers," a Mr. Johansson said. "We need you to join us in resisting this freeway."

Mr. Johansson told Ruby that there was a law that some kind of impact study had to be done in order to build a freeway, and the government had not done that. They could organize and take this to the courts. Would Ruby help?



Ruby stood against the wall. She felt like crying. This was finally supposed to be the time she could spend with her friends—at play.

But Ruby also knew that the people from St. Catherine's had a good cause. Freeways should not be more important than communities. This could not continue.

"I'll help," she finally said.



And she did. From that time on the little group began organizing people in Sherman Park against the freeway. They started a newsletter that they got out to all the residents. They brought the issue to the courts.

For years, the fight took nearly all of Ruby's free time. Eventually Leah and many of the Jews from Beth Jehudah joined the movement, as did her old neighbors from Bronzeville.



The next year the order went out to tear down the rest of the homes—the Carters' home included. In 1972, freeway construction was about to begin.

But just before this happened the courts heard the case that the Sherman Park residents had put together. District Judge John Reynolds issued an order to stop the work. He said that Mr. Johannson and his neighbors had been right—the government had not done the required impact study.



In 1973, Ruby got married to an old Bronzeville neighbor.

But her work did not stop. She continued to organize neighbors against the freeway. She went to other neighborhoods and helped them organize against the proposed freeways in their areas too.



By 1975 Ruby had her first child.

But her neighborhood work was not done. She organized public meetings between residents and government officials against the freeways.



In January of 1977, the government finally cancelled the order for the Sherman Park freeway. They said there was too much opposition "on many fronts."

And this pretty much ended freeway building in Milwaukee.

Ruby and her husband now had several children. Ruby was busy raising her family and going to college at night. She had never had time for herself. She had never had a childhood.





But as she looked back at her life and all she had done in place of play, she wondered about things. She asked herself a lot of questions.

Had it been worth the sacrifice?

Would she do it again? She thought long and hard.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."



Now YOU come in.  
What if Ruby's efforts had not paid off?

- 1. What if there had never been a fair housing law passed?*
- 2. What if the freeway wasn't stopped?*

**In your opinion, would Ruby's efforts have been worth the sacrifices then?**

**Would you have made these sacrifices?**

**Discuss this.**

The end