



211 of 250 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: UMBC chief recalls '63 bombing; Birmingham: Freeman A. Hrabowski, who appears in Spike Lee's 'Four Little Girls,' looks back at an attack on a church that killed his schoolmate and mobilized his nation.

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BODY:

CLARIFICATION

Sunday's Education Beat left the impression that the Midtown Academy (410-225-3257) accepts only students from Reservoir Hill and Bolton Hill. In fact, admission is open to any Baltimore child in grades kindergarten through third.

FREEMAN A. Hrabowski saw his friend Cynthia Wesley after school on Friday, Sept. 13, 1963. Freeman had turned 13 the month before and had just started 10th grade. Cynthia was a year older. They chatted for a time, and Freeman said as they parted, "See you on Monday."

It wasn't to be.

Cynthia and three other girls were killed that Sunday in a daylight bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. The killing of four innocent girls in a place of worship -- of all places -- shocked the nation and put the civil rights movement in full throttle.

Nearly 34 years later, Hrabowski, 46, is president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and one of those appearing in Spike Lee's feature-length documentary about the Birmingham tragedy. The film, "Four Little Girls," opened to excellent reviews Wednesday in New York City and will be seen on cable and possibly in theaters next year.

Hrabowski was recommended to Lee by Baltimore civil rights historian Taylor Branch, an adviser to Lee on the film. The UMBC president was filmed in New York and returned there recently for a screening of the finished work.

"Lee was able to balance the pain and the hope that were there at the same time," Hrabowski said last week.

His voice filled with emotion, Hrabowski recalled the "terror and the redemption" of the bombing and its aftermath. He said he had nightmares for years after what became known as "Birmingham Sunday."

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In much the same way that Americans recoiled at the magnitude of the Oklahoma City bombing three decades later, so they were outraged at the act of terror in Birmingham. "It showed us that no place was safe and nobody was safe," said Hrabowski. "Imagine four girls in a church. How scared I was!"

Scared, perhaps, but already a veteran of the movement. That spring, Hrabowski had marched, boycotted and been jailed in Birmingham, one of the cities targeted by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Hrabowski had encountered the infamous public safety commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor in a protest march on City Hall. Connor shouted "What do you want, little Niggra?" and then spat on the ninth-grader. It was Easter time.

But the funeral for three of the girls, held at Hrabowski's Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, brought a strange easing of the pain, Hrabowski said. He remembered the three caskets. Denise McNair, 11, the youngest, was in the middle.

He remembered the eulogy delivered by King: "God has a way of bringing good out of evil." And the double column of priests, rabbis and ministers who filed into the church.

"We'd never seen anything like that before," said Hrabowski. "We'd never seen so many whites in our church. That was the beginning of hope."

Educational redemption also followed the bombing, said Hrabowski.

The turmoil in Birmingham that September had been fueled by a court-ordered desegregation plan for the city. King and others had been preparing Hrabowski and thousands of other young people to demonstrate peacefully for their rights.

"I was fortunate to have educated parents, and so did some of the girls who were killed," said Hrabowski, "but at that time the vast majority of blacks in the South weren't well-educated." Today, Hrabowski heads a university that sends some of the nation's brightest African-American students to top graduate schools and research laboratories.

"We came out of the fire of Birmingham knowing that knowledge is power, and that is still true today," he said.

And how does he feel about Robert (Dynamite Bob) Chambliss, the man convicted of killing his friend Cynthia and the three others?

"I'm able to forgive. It's a lifelong cleansing process. We should hate what people do, but we don't hate the people," Hrabowski said.

School commissioners getting down to work

It's much too early to say that the new Baltimore Board of School Commissioners will make a difference, but one thing is certain: This outfit means business.

The board's second public meeting Tuesday contrasted sharply with meetings of the body it replaced in June.

It's making decisions, spending money (a function of the Board of Estimates in the old system), cleaning schools a full 55 days before they are to reopen and spending considerably less meeting time patting itself on the back.

Interim CEO Robert E. Schiller, meanwhile, was demonstrating in his first full week on the job that he'll be something more than a caretaker. One of his first acts was to order academic bureaucrats out of North Avenue and into the schools. (That's been done before, of course, but they always seem to migrate back to the central office.)

"We can't remote-control the system from North Avenue," said Schiller.

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Midtown Academy seeks students for coming year

The school board last week approved four new privately operated, publicly financed schools under its "New Schools Initiative," and one of them announced it is looking for a few good students.

The Midtown Academy, at 1398 Mount Royal Ave., will serve about 80 students from the Bolton Hill and Reservoir Hill areas in grades kindergarten through three.

A lottery at 10 a.m. July 26 at the school will determine the student body. Interested parents should call the school at 410-225-3257.

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