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## 'Shame of Chicago' tells tale of Chicago's fair housing struggle

Darcel Rockett : 7-8 minutes : 5/11/2021

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**Fair Housing Month is over, but the fight against discrimination continues. 'The Shame of Chicago' shines a light on the racial wealth gap.**



Lucy Baird sorts through historic documents in the Baird & Warner archive on May 3, 2021, that belonged to her grandfather John Baird, related to the fair housing debate in Chicago in the 1960s. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

If you had to guess a shame that categorizes Chicago, what would it be?

For filmmaker and native Chicagoan Bruce Orenstein, the shame lies with the people, policies and local and federal institutions that segregated Black and white communities and determined that neighborhoods of color were unworthy of investment.

Orenstein explores those policies and the decision-making in his five-part documentary series, "The Shame of Chicago." One episode, "The Color Tax: The Origins of the Modern-Day Racial Wealth Gap," centers on homes that were sold to Black families through installment contracts — for much more than white buyers would pay — and how and why contract-sellers were allowed to do it, plus what happened when Black families organized to fight back through the Contract Buyers League.

The episode will be screened Thursday during a virtual event hosted by the Chicago Architecture Center.

In the episode, [Clyde Ross](#), who was a member of the Contract Buyers League, shares his story of having to take whatever job he could find to make his monthly payment.

"I worked my (expletive) off trying to keep it up — worked two jobs — the post office, pizza place, all kinds of work to keep it up. I'm by myself with all these bills, so I got to do it," Ross said in the documentary.

"It's not just that Clyde Ross is suffering, not seeing his kids because he's working extra hours and all that money is being siphoned into the contract lender's hands, it's the fact that everyone around him is suffering the same thing," said Ta-Nehisi Coates, an author and former journalist who has made a case for reparations, a redress for the systemic racism enacted against the U.S. Black population.

Nykea Pippion McGriff, president of the Chicago Association of Realtors, said Orenstein's documentary is a reminder of the work needed to be done. The episode was screened for members of the Realtors group last month.

In 2019, the local real estate trade group issued an apology for its role in redlining and segregation policies. The National Association of Realtors issued an apology in November.

"We can't move forward without addressing the industry's previous actions and the impact that they've made, that we still see today, so I think that was very important to first acknowledge and apologize," she said.

McGriff said the Chicago association continues to educate buyers and real estate agents on fair housing issues, including an interactive simulation where agents work against the clock to close four deals, confronting various scenarios where discrimination enters into the transaction.

The association also recently launched an online portal where consumers can report any issues with unjust appraisals. McGriff said the Chicago group is working with the Illinois Association of Realtors to gather the data.

"You can't argue with data. ... If things start jumping out, then do we have an issue with one entity, or is this a pervasive situation that we're seeing, like we did back in the '50s and '60s?" she said.



Photos of Stephen Baird, left, and John Baird are seen May 3, 2021 in the Baird & Warner archive. John Baird, who was known for his fight against housing discrimination in the Chicago area. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

During a panel discussion after the screening, Lucy Baird, historian and director of community impact at Baird & Warner, shared her family's history of fighting housing discrimination. She is granddaughter of the late John Baird, who testified before the Chicago City Council and state legislators in support of fair housing. An advocate for laws ending racial discrimination in home sales, when his position clashed with the Chicago Real Estate Board, Baird resigned in protest in 1965.

"He would write a response to every letter, whether it was to someone living in one of the communities we had an office in or a senator — just that small gesture I think is so indicative of the level of passion he had for this, he was taking time to change individual's minds on this issue," she told the Tribune.

Stephen Baird, John's son and Lucy's father, said his father showed him the hate mail he received over the years.

"I wouldn't really think he was a crusader, per se, but I asked him about that and he said, 'No, I just felt that was the right thing to do.' That just seemed the most logical, correct thing to do. It got him a lot of trouble in the industry, but he didn't care," Baird said. "My father never really looked at the industry as a resource because, quite frankly, I just don't think they're at the head of the pack on this issue."



Lucy Baird sorts through historic documents in the Baird & Warner archive on May 3, 2021, that concern her grandfather John Baird and are related to the fair housing debate in Chicago in the 1960s. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

The family-owned real estate services company recently established a \$215,000 John Baird Scholarship Fund to support law school students pursuing fair housing advocacy through the Fair Housing Legal Support Center & Clinic at the John Marshall Law School of the University of Illinois at Chicago. The scholarship is funded through Baird & Warner's philanthropic arm, Good Will Works, and the Stephen W. and Susan M. Baird Foundation.

"It's important to use our seat at the table to create change and that's what we hope this scholarship will do. By supporting a local institution with strong Chicago ties, we're able to encourage future leaders in fair housing for decades to come," Lucy Baird said.

Orenstein, director and producer of the documentary, said people have responded well to it.

"I'm hopeful that it will add something positive to the conversation that we're having," he said.

*The Chicago Architecture Center will virtually screen "The Color Tax" Thursday. Registration is required. Tickets for the public are \$12.*



Darcel Rockett is a writer and curious soul — the latter informing the former. Her curious nature has led her to write for news organizations in London, the Virgin Islands, Los Angeles and Phoenix. Currently, she writes lifestyle pieces for the Chicago Tribune, where she's served as a digital editor and features reporter for a decade.

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