Community Development and Struggle (1950–2000)

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The black community came of age during the last half of the 20th century, but this great success was followed by a crash. At one time the entire community lived together, but one of the unanticipated consequences of the Civil Rights Movement was the flight of the black middle class to suburban areas. The inner city became black and poor and a concentration of all the social problems of the day. Especially devastating was the scourge of crack.

The third quarter of the twentieth century has been dubbed the Golden Age of American capitalism, denoting the postwar economic boom and the strengthening of democratic institutions. In the wake of the infrastructure destruction in industrialized capitalist nations in Western Europe and Japan, the United States had an outsized share of global markets. During this period, world trade quadrupled in size, and the United States experienced the largest gains. By 1950 the United States had 60% of the total output of the seven largest capitalist nations. Fewer than five hundred companies were responsible for approximately a quarter of the industrial output of the world outside the Soviet bloc. In this booming production environment with effective job color bars, white workers, white males in particular, felt empowered to push for consistently higher wages and better working conditions.

To put a check on this labor push, some five million African Americans were effectively recruited from the South to the Midwest, West, and Northeast to work in industrial jobs they had been previously denied. The integration of African Americans into jobs that were previously reserved for whites—even the threat of such integration helped to serve as an anchor on white wages. The efforts of a downward push on wages by companies were met with a strong countervailing force, as over a third of workers were employed union members. In that moment, under those conditions, the United States achieved its highest level of income equality.

At that time, Toledo was an industrial juggernaut. During the 1950s, Toledo was the home of seven Fortune 500 companies, mostly located in a bustling downtown area within blocks of one another. There were as many as 40,000 employees working downtown, whereas by 2000 the number was under 20,000. Haughton Elevator Company, the Toledo Scale Company, and Doehler Jarvis were three of many industrial companies based in Toledo. Doehler Jarvis was once the world’s largest manufacturer of die-cast metal. The foundry produced
metal products such as engine bearings and hood ornaments for many automobile manufacturers. Previously, Toledo was the headquarters of Willy’s Overland Motors, formerly the nation’s second largest automobile producer after Ford Motor Company. Willy’s was best known for its production of military jeeps.

In addition to growing economic opportunities, there were also stronger democratic practices slowly developing as a result of trenchant political and movement struggles taking place in this country and in Africa and other developing regions. For instance, in 1960 the apartheid state of South Africa massacred 69 blacks in response to their demands for ending Pass laws, and in 1963 terrorists bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Alabama in response to blacks’ push for civil rights, including the successful Brown V. Board Supreme Court decision. By 1964, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law and several African nations had gained their independence, with the understanding that the full continent would be free of colonialism in the foreseeable future. The urban riots that spread in this country during the mid-to-late 1960s, starting with Watts in 1965 and reaching Detroit in 1967 with some of the most volatile protests in the nation, never reached Toledo on that scale. Nevertheless, buildings were set ablaze in Toledo’s Dorr Street and Detroit Avenue areas. Additionally, once the Black Panther Party was established in 1966, a chapter was soon established in Toledo, and local members had their share of shootouts with the police over the practices that these law enforcers used in patrolling and controlling the black neighborhoods.

At the end of the 20th century, African Americans in Toledo continued making uneven strides while the wider world was convulsed and transformed, from the Rwandan genocide that resulted in 800,000 Tutsis being slaughtered by Hutus, to the urban explosion in response to the acquittal of white Los Angeles police officers, whose shocking, merciless billy clubbing of Rodney King was viewed around the world, to the release from prison and ascendency of Nelson Mandela to the South African presidency, to the breakup of the Soviet Union, and to the debut of the Internet.

Progress was occurring and some gains were being consolidated, but this period in the development of Toledo’s Black community, not unlike the final period between 2000 and 2016, witnessed progress exemplifying the dictum of two steps forward, one step backward. As Stage Three illustrates, Toledo had its share of professionals and leaders in the second half of the twentieth century, including many who came from Brand Whitlock, a public housing complex in the inner city. Leaders included the likes of Ella P. Stewart, the first black female licensed and practicing pharmacist in the country; J.B. Simmons, first black City Council member and first black vice mayor; Wayman Palmer, who served as the director of Self-Help Development and Technical Assistance of