

An Update from the Saint Nicholas Adult Education Committee – A Documentary on African Americans in Evanston (Submitted by parishioner Michael Doyle)

More than sixty-five parishioners, family members, and friends gathered in Oldershaw Hall last Sunday morning, February 7, 2010, to watch and then discuss an eye-opening film on the history of African Americans in Evanston. The film is the story of a generation's courage that helped to free African Americans in Evanston from the bondage of discrimination. Entitled "The Evanston African American Community's Living Story: From Segregated and Sacrificing to Enduring and Established," many parishioners sat in silence as a variety of painful and hope-filled scenes from Evanston's past were brought to life.

The documentary by Craig Dudnick shows how Evanston's black community began to settle on the west side (not the east side near the lake) of Evanston in the early 1900's as families fled places like Abbeville, South Carolina where lynchings were occurring. Using still photographs that were difficult to view, the documentary even shows how the lynching of prominent citizen Anthony Crawford continues to inspire today many of his descendants living in Evanston. His descendants speak of a black community that grew and made inroads to a not always friendly Evanston white community on the north shore of Chicago. Through the use of numerous testimonials the film shows how it was a time when black school children were made to sit along the back wall of the classroom. It was a time when even after death, a black person couldn't be put to rest in her hometown of Evanston but had to be buried in Glenview.

In the early years one family would move to Evanston from South Carolina and establish itself, allowing another family soon to follow. As more and more families settled into Evanston, newly elected black officials would later demand the respect of Chicago's mostly white political community. Eventually white politicians came to Evanston and were even made to deliver on their promises to the black community.

The documentary goes on to show how such national figures as Clarence Darrow and W.E.B. Dubois made their way to Evanston in the coming years. Our own local high school is highlighted as well. E.T.H.S. had an award-winning drill team in the late 1940's thanks to the African American veterans of World War II who were on campus. However, overcoming racism in many professions came with greater difficulty. Becoming a fireman or policeman, for example, was a difficult achievement for black Evanstonians during the last century. Near the end of the documentary, one black firefighter speaks of the painful rites of passage he endured to keep his job. With great courage he viewed his white peers in the fire department and said, "If they can do it, I can do it." He would later go on to become the first African American fire department marshall in the history of Evanston.

When the well-crafted documentary was over many audience members spoke of how surprised they were in learning new and often painful things about Evanston's past. Clearly, this is a gifted film maker and documentarian. For through a variety of interviews, photographs and still pictures, the filmmaker Craig Dudnick brings to life the struggles of African Americans in Evanston for over a century.

The discussion after the film was filled with powerful testimonials supporting the important and ongoing work of this filmmaker and the work ahead of us as a faith community. Surely other unfolding stories remain to be told at another time.