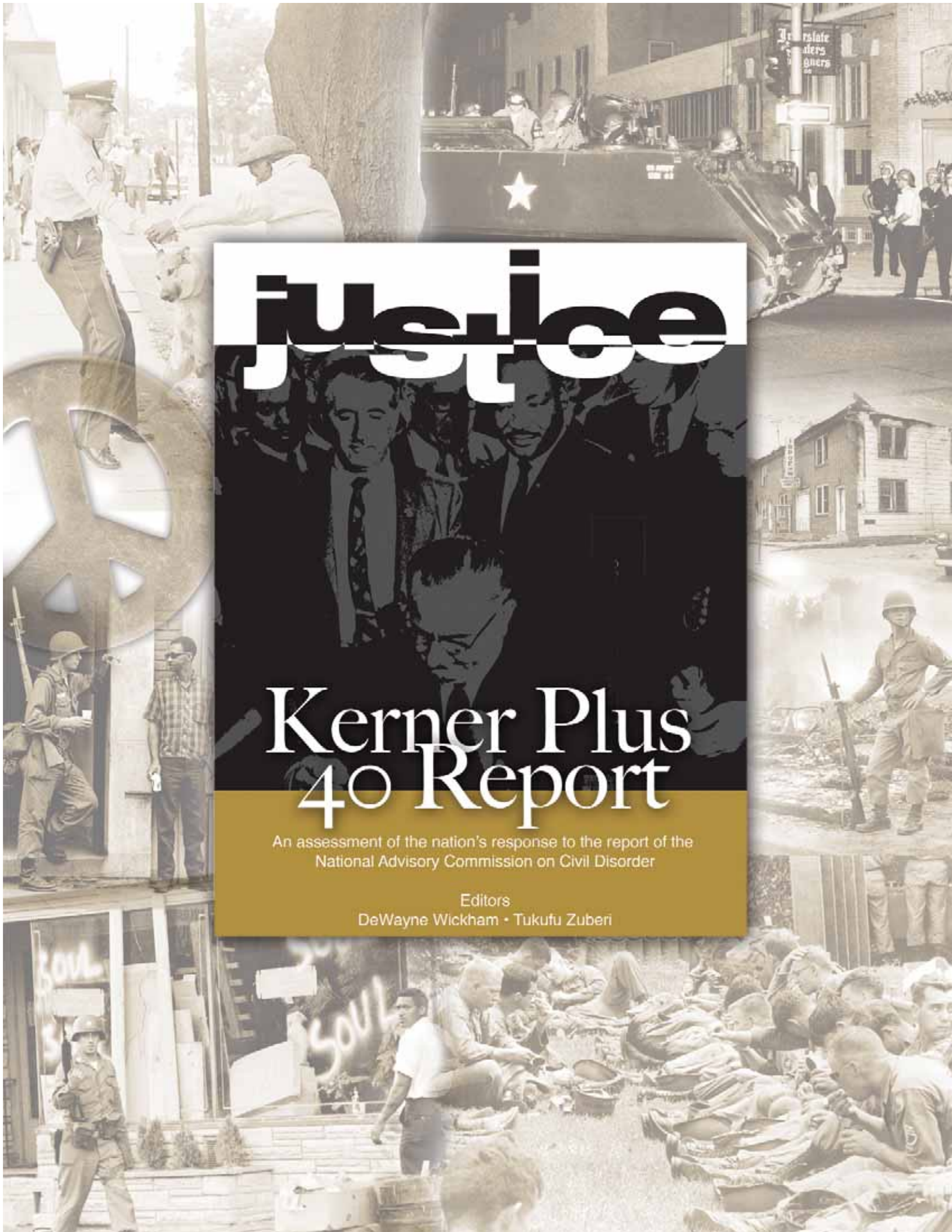
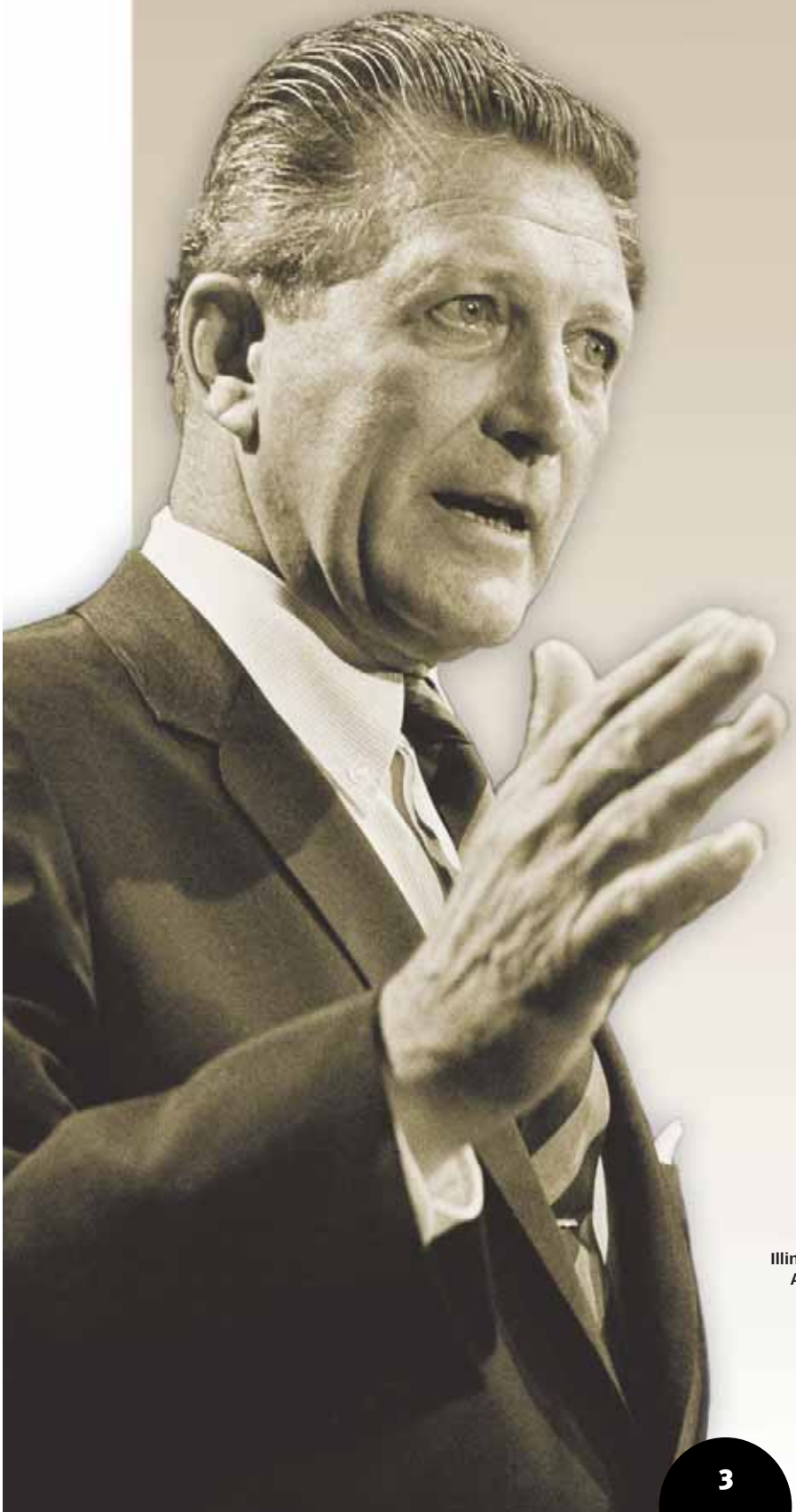


Kerner Plus 40 Report

An assessment of the nation's response to the report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder

Editors
DeWayne Wickham • Tukufu Zuberi

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal."



Illinois Governor Otto Kerner
Associated Press Photo

Kerner Plus 40 Report

An assessment of the nation's response to the report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders

Editors
DeWayne Wickham – Tukufu Zuberi

Managing Editor
Tonyaa J. Weathersbee

Academic Editor
Camille Z. Charles

This work is a joint project of the

University of Pennsylvania's
Annenberg School for Communication
And
Center for Africana Studies
And the
Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies at
North Carolina A&T State University

North Carolina A&T State University
Dr. Stanley F. Battle, Chancellor
Dr. Janice Brewington, Provost

University of Pennsylvania
Dr. Amy Gutmann, President
Dr. Ronald J. Daniels, Provost

THE KERNER GENERATION

Birmingham in black and white

On the 40th anniversary of the Kerner Report, residents representing five generations weigh in on the state of race relations then and now in the city known for its tumultuous past

By Chandra R. Thomas

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. – Civil rights icon the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once famously told President John F. Kennedy that this city was by far the worst big city in the United States when it came to race relations.

It's a distinction that's been hard for the Southern city best known for being on the frontlines of the civil rights movement to shake. Ironically, King was killed the year that the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, more commonly known as the Kerner Commission, made its famous observation that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal."

In Birmingham, at least, blacks seemed committed to fighting against that prospect. Compared with some of the other riot-stricken cities that the commission studied in the late 1960s, such as Los Angeles, Newark, N.J., and Detroit, black people here were mobilized and actively working at tearing down, brick-by-brick, the rigid wall of systematic racial inequality that had so deeply divided much of the country along color lines.

"Birmingham has long been considered the birthplace of the civil rights movement and the fact that black people were taking a formal stand against segregation through marches and sit-ins has always been a great source of pride for African Americans here," says lifelong resident Yvas Witherspoon, a 40-something substance-abuse counselor. "People here were on the front lines of the movement that helped make important changes in this country."

The city's segregationist past doesn't appear to have hurt its ability to draw business and industry. It is home to major banks Regions Financial Corporation and Compass Bancshares and several steelmakers such as U.S. Steel. However, anecdotal sentiment at least suggests that antiquated perceptions of the city has allowed other cities with considerable black populations, such as Atlanta, Houston and Charlotte, N.C., to lure away many potential workers, particularly black professionals.

"There's a lot more opportunity here than people think, but a lot of professionals who aren't from here, particularly young black professionals, won't even entertain the idea of living and working here because they still associate it with those images of fire hoses and police dogs," says advertising executive Satina Richardson, 32, a Birmingham native.

"A lot of young professionals from here actually move away after they finish school because they feel they have better opportunities away from Birmingham," she says. "They usually realize later that it was better than they'd thought."

A major earnings gap between blacks and whites in Jefferson County, where the city of Birmingham is located, might feed the perception Richardson described. Blacks make up 41 percent of the 656,700 people who live there, and, according to a 2006 U.S. Census American Communities Survey, blacks in Jefferson County earn $34,723 a year compared with $68,970 for whites. That's a 49 percent gap, up from 42 percent in 1960.

Now, blacks account for 32 percent of Jefferson County's 180,978 homeowners, compared with 21 percent in 1960.

There also has been considerable political progress. In 1979, two-term City Council member Richard Arrington Jr. was elected Birmingham's first black mayor, a post he held for 20 years.

During his tenure, blacks gradually dominated city government, including the council and school board. He also was credited with revitalizing the city's economy and for helping to create an historic Civil Rights District that includes the internationally acclaimed Birmingham Civil Rights Institute museum and research center, which opened in 1992. In recent years, two more black men have been elected mayor, including Larry Langford who took office in late 2007.

Still, it remains to be seen how far the city once nicknamed "Bombingham" for its prevalence of racially motivated bombings has progressed beyond the deep-seated attitudes and beliefs that sparked the racial unrest.

In commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Kerner Report, a diverse mix of Birminghamians – from a black District Court judge who was barely out of kindergarten when the report was released to a pair of women expecting children in this anniversary year– offer their thoughts about the evolution of race relations in the city so clearly haunted by its tumultuous past.

1960s Generation
Katrina Ross, 46

Few people managed to grow up in Birmingham unaware of the racial tension that seemed forever etched into the minds of Americans across the country. But federal District Judge Katrina Ross, who one year ago became the first black woman to be elected to that post in Birmingham, is among that minority.

Her close-knit middle-class neighborhood, church, and the halls of her Catholic elementary school and, later, all-black A.H. Parker High School, were packed with people who looked like her. Race just wasn't an issue to her or her black friends, even the ones who attended majority-white schools.

"We only dealt with black people," says Ross, who doesn't recall

having any close friends of another race while growing up.

That comfort zone was shattered years later during her transition from all-black Fisk University in Nashville to the predominately white University of Alabama.

"I had come from an environment where there was this sense of pride about being black to going to a school where I was just another student," says Ross, who ultimately graduated from the slightly more diverse University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).

"For the first time, I was very aware of being a minority."

For the first time in her life, she was not living in a predominately black environment, where her culture was the standard or even celebrated, for that matter.

The reality of racism and injustice became clearer as Ross progressed through law school and established her career as a private practice attorney. Nowadays, she feels that the divide in Birmingham has evolved largely into that of economic class, noting that the inner city remains disproportionately black and poor.

"After hundreds of years of slavery, I don't think we'll ever catch up," says Ross, who admits that support from white women was critical in her election victory. "Racism is still alive and well in America, and in Birmingham, people are still very separated by race, but black people now have more of an opportunity to improve their lives - if they have the strong will to do so. People have just gotten more tolerant because it's not politically correct to be overtly racist."

Jim Jager, 44

Jim Jager travels the country every week for work. No matter where he is – from California to New York – when he mentions that he's from Birmingham, the reaction is the same.

"They look at me funny," says Jager, president of New South, a marketing research firm. "As recently as five years ago I had a guy ask me, 'So are y'all still hanging people out there?' "

Jager, who grew up in the exclusive Mountain Brook community, says he's seen racial attitudes shift for the better. One of the major issues facing Birmingham now, says Jager, is the growing rift between black and Hispanic communities.

"I've done a lot of research with the Hispanic community and I have heard straight from a Hispanic that some of them feel like they're being treated like the black people were treated by whites in the '60s, only they feel it's the blacks doing it now," he says. "It's a brewing problem that's going to have to get dealt with."

There have been improvements in race relations in Birmingham with each generational shift, Jager says.

"We're not past it completely, but Birmingham has definitely progressed more than it gets credit for," he says. "I think it's going to continue to get better as those old feelings erode."

1970s Generation

Brad Kachelhofer, 39

Homewood High School was no bastion of racial harmony, but with a black population of between 25 percent to 30 percent, the suburban school just outside of the city limits offered a more diverse environment than the wealthier, all-white "over the mountain" communities of Vestavia Hills and Mountain Brook.

Brad Kachelhofer, 39, and co-owner of The Modern Brand marketing firm, says she sat next to black students in class and even swapped peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with some at lunchtime, but it wasn't until her 20th high school reunion that she actually became aware of the challenges that some of her classmates of color had faced.

For example, there was the handsome and popular black jock she admired from afar.

"At the reunion, he told me that some of the white girls would stick notes in his locker saying, 'I would do you after school if you weren't black.' And they thought that was a compliment," says Kachelhofer. "I was just so oblivious, I remember everyone being polite but basically sticking with their own."

Kachelhofer, who proudly boasts of her racially diverse mix of friends, says the difference now is that legal segregation in Birmingham has largely been replaced with self-segregation, mostly along economic lines.

"Now when people move to a certain neighborhood or send their kids to a certain school they say it's because I feel they need 'a Christian education,' " she says. "They just say that so that their true motivations are not as obvious to the outside observer."

The black community, she contends, is no exception.

"The powerful and influential members of the African-American community send their kids to EPIC, considered one of the better elementary schools, then they go to the Alabama School of Fine Arts," she says. "They get credit for having their child in a Birmingham Public School, but they'd never send their kids to the schools that the poor kids attend."

Mustafa Ali, 39

As if growing up black in Birmingham were not challenging enough, native Mustafa Ali, 39, and his 12 (yes, 12) brothers and sisters faced an even bigger hurdle. They grew up black and poor in the city's historically white and wealthy Norwood community at a time when the demographics were shifting to middle- and working-class blacks.

The "separate and unequal" distinction that Kerner emphasized in the report eerily mirrors Ali's childhood experiences.

"I remember whites throwing soap at us with the words, 'Wash up, nigger' scribbled on it," says Ali, who works as a martial arts instructor and security guard. "Whites made sure blacks knew their place. Right across the tracks, there was a white area called Tarrant. As a black person, you didn't want to get caught in Tarrant unless you were working."

Ali says the Birmingham of his childhood is quite different from the one his daughters, Miniya, 8, and Ayanna, 5, are experiencing.

"Things have changed but they have also stayed the same. My daughter goes to a school with all kinds of children in her class together: black, Asian, Arab, Chinese, something I could never have dreamed of as a child," he says. "On the other hand, when black people started moving into white areas like Tarrant and Centerpoint, the whites started moving away. People really aren't

coming together in Birmingham."

Ali says the biggest disappointment 40 years later is not white racism, but the dwindling black community.

"Back in the day, we all lived in the same neighborhood no matter what we did for a living," he says. "The only difference was that if you were doing better, you just fixed up your home more. Nowadays, when we get a little money in our pocket, we want to move away like we're better."

1980s Generation

Erin Williams, 23

Erin Williams isn't originally from Birmingham. She grew up just a two-hour drive away in the rural community of Fayetteville, Ga., just outside of Atlanta. She was vaguely familiar with Birmingham's volatile racial history (it was discussed briefly in school) when she decided to move there to attend virtually all-white Samford University.

Thoughts of racism never invaded her early life, but her first rude awakening occurred when volunteer work sent her to mostly black, rural Perry County, Ala., one of the poorest counties in the country.

"A lot of times we talk about going out of the country to help people, but for the first time I realized how severe the poverty is in this country," Williams says. "Race and poverty don't necessarily go hand-in-hand, but there are definitely some disparities."

Now as a graduate student studying occupational therapy at UAB and as a volunteer at Olivia's House, a drug-treatment facility for women, Williams says she feels more keenly aware of racial issues.

"There's been some progress in the city, but nowadays there's still a lot of segregation in the area of education," she says. "A lot of the people in the poorer areas aren't getting equal access to a quality education."

Dale Thornton Jr., 26

Race, namely his blackness, had an impact on every aspect of 26-year-old Dale Thornton Jr.'s experiences growing up – especially when he and his family moved to Chelsea, a tiny all-white, rural community outside Birmingham. Many of his classmates sported the stereotypical redneck uniform of overalls and cowboy boots. Some even sported T-shirts emblazoned with the Confederate flag.

Still, Thornton admits he was caught off guard during his freshman year when a white classmate yelled out to him, in front of a teacher, "Boy, I will hang you."

Stunned, Thornton stood paralyzed by the sting of the hateful words.

"It was shocking, like somebody punching you in the stomach," he says.

Over the years, such comments became old hat, but Thornton made friends, even some white ones. He now chalks up his early experiences as important life lessons.

It doesn't hurt that he appears to have gotten the last laugh. Last year, not long after graduating from historically black Miles College, Thornton purchased one of his father's five McDonald's restaurants, located in the suburb of Homewood. The deal made Thornton the fast food chain's youngest franchisee in the Southeast.

"In a way, I was scared to put it out there that I am the owner, like maybe if people saw my black face they wouldn't want to go there," he says, "but I've made it so that the experience at my place is such that you don't care who owns it. I still get some looks when people know that I'm the owner, but I think we've come a long way."

1990s Generation

Kamaria Nelson, 17

Kamaria Nelson is young, privileged and black – and so are most of her close friends. The daughter of a psychiatrist and a dermatologist, she lives in an exclusive neighborhood and attends predominately white John Carroll Catholic High School. Nelson spends most of her free time, however, with the black kids she's known all her life from Jack and Jill of America, Inc., known as the quintessential social group for the offspring of wealthy blacks.

"I think things are better in terms of race relations in Birmingham, but I also think that people just feel more comfortable being around people who are like them," says Nelson, who also has friends of different races from school.

Nelson says she has great reverence for those who fought on her behalf in the past, even as she is keenly aware that those fights were part of a bygone era.

"I see things getting better in Birmingham from, like, 40 years ago. I think now we're viewed more as an equal. In many ways, there's been a lot of progress," Nelson says.

Birmingham's growing number of black professionals, such as her parents, are proof of that progress, she adds.

Haley Lloyd, 17

Haley Lloyd says racial issues in Birmingham have progressed beyond black and white.

"From what I can tell, the blacks and the whites where I live get along fine. It's the illegal immigrants that are getting it hard," says Lloyd, 17, of Columbiana, a quaint Birmingham suburb.

"I don't hear people saying racist things about black people, but I have heard people say stuff about they need to go back to Mexico and they'll be talking about a person who is actually from Spain," she says. "A lot of people are not cultured."

Lloyd, who attends an all-white private school, says she feels that blacks and whites generally get along well in her community, a sign, she contends, that race relations are improving.

"I know around here it used to be really bad, but it's gotten a lot better," she says. "I don't feel that there is any racism in my neighborhood. People interact with each other like we're all the same and equal."

Dreams for the 2000 Generation

Laura Anderson, 36, white and expecting

As a child growing up in Rome, Ga., Laura Anderson never really questioned the fact that all of the students in her advanced placement classes were white like her.

"I have a close black friend from high school who ended up becoming a very successful attorney in Atlanta," says Anderson, who moved to Birmingham in 1989 to attend Montevallo College. "Obviously, she was very smart, but no one ever encouraged her to join our classes. I didn't think about it at the time."

Now, as she and her husband await the birth of their first child this spring, she admits that they're concerned about the impact that Birmingham's racial climate and growing economic segregation will have on their offspring.

"Racism is huge, but so is the division among classes," says Anderson, who works as an assistant archivist for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

"We are all taught to be afraid of the poor, like poor automatically means bad," she says. "It's something that we think about and it's a challenge to overcome, but if you're personally committed to not raising your child in a bubble, you can turn that around in Birmingham or anywhere else."

Dafina Ward, 30, black and expecting

Dafina Ward fits neatly into the cookie-cutter profile to which Kachelhofer (whom she doesn't know) alluded. She attended EPIC School and graduated from the School of Fine Arts, but now as a mother of a 2-year-old and with another child due in May, she wonders if she and her husband will enroll their children in Birmingham's public school system.

"I've always been an advocate for public schools, they were phenomenal when I was growing up, but not anymore," Ward says. "So many people have left the city. We also don't want to send her to a private school where's she's the only (black) one; she has to have the best."

Even in her comfortable middle-class upbringing in the suburban community of Huffman, Ward, a lawyer, vividly remembers the day a white classmate called her a nigger while on the Jungle Gym.

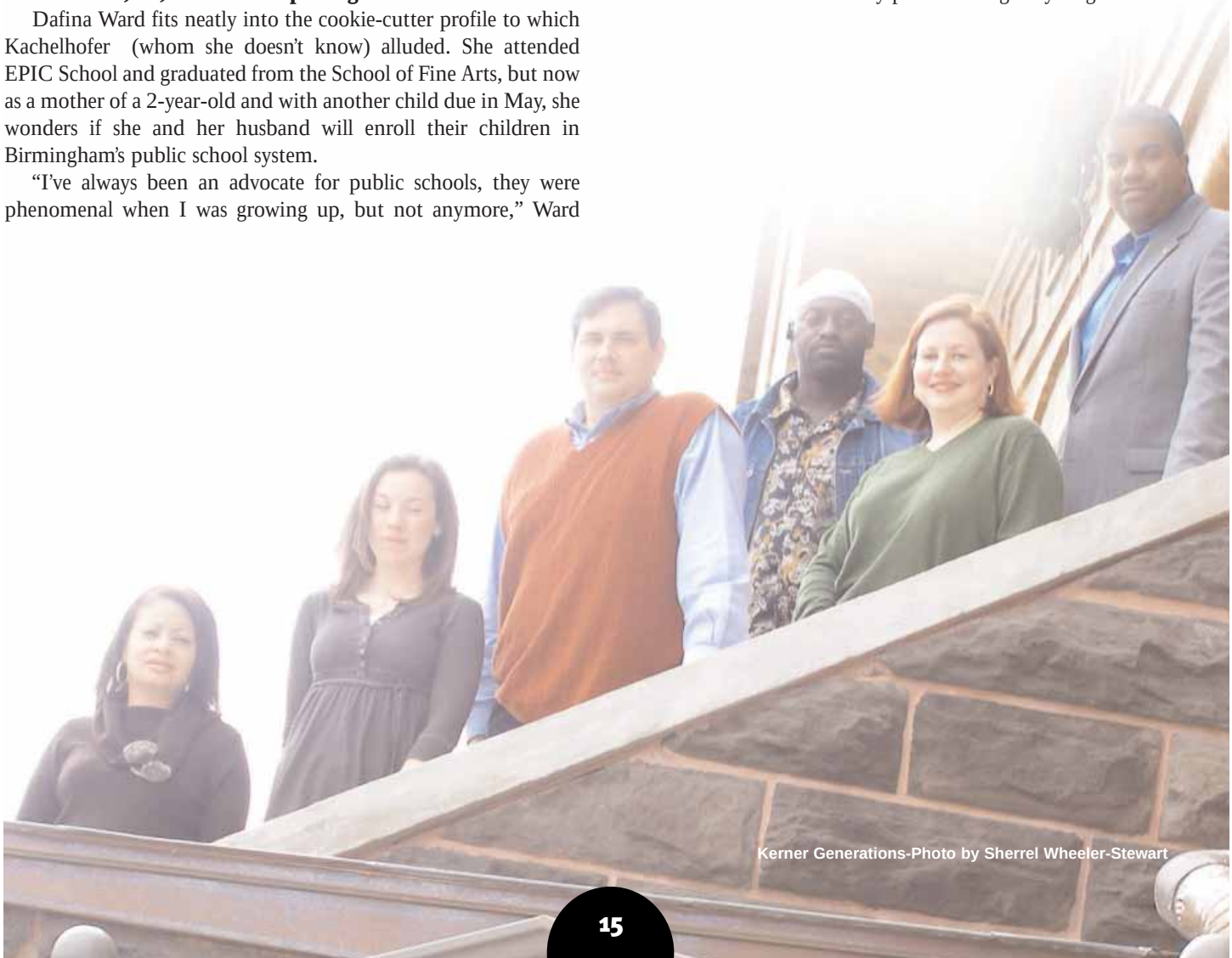
"I knocked him off," recalls Ward, laughing at the memory.

Ward says she has contemplated moving her family out of state as Birmingham increasingly stratifies along racial and economic lines.

"There's always a lot of talk about how Birmingham could have been Atlanta and it's true," she says. "Birmingham is still very much caught up in race and it has kept it from progressing. I have a great group of friends of all races and we want to make sure our children are exposed to that. We've all decided together that we'll have to create the Birmingham that we want to experience."

Just as media images of racially charged civil rights clashes might be forever tied to Birmingham's image, so is Vulcan. The 56-foot statue, named for the Roman god of fire and the forge, overlooks the heart of downtown Birmingham from atop Red Mountain.

Although the verdict is still out about whether it's a metaphor for the Birmingham of today, many remain optimistic that this city can transcend its incendiary past and magically forge anew. ■



Kerner Generations-Photo by Sherrel Wheeler-Stewart