

RECLAIMING INDIANAPOLIS' BLACK HISTORY

S02 E05 TRANSCRIPT

THE STORY OF MS. JEAN SPEARS

CLAUDIA: the reason I'm in the preservation business is because my mother taught me that this was something important.

DEQAH: That's Claudia Polley, the preservationist we introduced you to last episode.

VANESSA: She wouldn't do any of the work she does today if it weren't for her mother's influence.

CLAUDIA: She had been a preservationist back in the day when we all just thought she was a little crazy.

DEQAH: When Claudia's mother, Jean Spears, got into preservation in the late nineteen fifties, she started small.

CLAUDIA: They were tearing down these mansions, and Mom would go into these homes and she'd take out marble fireplaces, mahogany staircases, stained glass windows, and then she created her own, um her own antique store.

VANESSA: In the sixties, Jean raised her preservation game. It all started when she began looking for her family's new home.

CLAUDIA: We couldn't move to the house that we wanted to move to because of segregation, the white realtors wouldn't let us go through, so my mother started looking downtown, and Lockerbie Square was then, at that point was, a white slum. Now it's the preeminent preservation district in Indianapolis, and mom bought a house for \$5,000. It was not in great shape.

DEQAH: How many, how many like bedrooms?

CLAUDIA: 15 room; one bathroom. It was really not a place that you wanted to set foot in,

DEQAH: But That didn't scare Jean Spears.

CLAUDIA: She restored it beautifully and lived in it for 15 years and then said, "Why am I not doing this to the Black neighborhood of downtown Indianapolis?" where her grandparents had lived.

ENTER MUSIC

VANESSA: It was easier said than done. During the nineteen fifties and sixties, the city of Indianapolis used eminent domain to take land away from Indiana Avenue for highway construction.

DEQAH: The city then sold the land to Indiana **University**

VANESSA: Then she saw Indiana Avenue take another hit.

CLAUDIA: they watched Madam Walker's house be destroyed for the widening of West Street. Nobody's stood up and said, Nope, Nope, you can't do that.

DEQAH: But hhe city DID. luckily about six blocks of historic homes survived.

ENTER MUSIC

VANESSA: One day, she saw an opportunity to buy one of those homes. It was...well, another fixer-upper.

CLAUDIA: if the termites had not been holding hands, that house would have fallen down.

DEQAH: Jean worked her magic, and turned it into another beautiful home.

VANESSA: She met her new neighbors, and organized them. She helped rename the neighborhood to Ransom Place, in honor of Freeman Ransom, Madam Walker's lawyer, who had lived in the neighborhood during the company's heyday in the 1910s.

DEQAH: In the late 1980s, Jean noticed the university making moves, once again.

CLAUDIA: The university it's all on the south side of Indiana avenue. It said it was not going to cross over to the north side. Well, it would have crossed over a lot sooner than it has, even now, if mom hadn't taken a stake in Ransom Place.

VANESSA: Jean and some neighbors worked with the Landmarks Commision to get a historic designation for Ransom Place.

DEQAH: They uncovered the names of Black doctors, civic leaders, and other professionals who'd lived in the neighborhood – many of whom had worked for Madam Walker.

VANESSA: In 1991, they succeeded. Today the National Register of Historic Places includes this neighborhood.

CLAUDIA: That's how Ransom Place Historic District came to be.

DEQAH: Thanks in no small part to the connection to Madam C.J. Walker, Jean Spears was able to save this pocket of Black history, in an area the city had almost erased from memory.

MUSIC FADES OUT

CREDITS MUSIC BEGINS

VANESSA: But Black Indy History is about More than Madam Walker - other stories and places in the city need protection, too.

DEQAH: Luckily, today, a new generation is carrying on what Ms. Jean Spears started.

INTRO CREDITS

VANESSA: Welcome to Urban Roots, a podcast from Urbanist Media that dives into little-known stories from history. We're your hosts, I'm cities journalist Vanessa Quirk.

DEQAH: And I'm historic preservationist Deqah Hussein-Wetzel. Today we're continuing our two-part series on Black Indianapolis.

VANESSA: If you missed Part 1, now's a good time to go back and listen to that episode, so you can learn about Madam C.J. Walker and Indiana Avenue.

DEQAH: In this episode, we'll go beyond Madam Walker and tell you stories of Black Indianapolis that have rarely been told.

VANESSA: And we'll introduce you to three Black women who are safeguarding these stories of the past and guiding Indianapolis toward a better future.

KAILA AUSTIN MEETS FLINORA FRAZIER & DISCOVERS NORWOOD

KAILA: I have a new nickname. I'm being called a rogue historian. Oh my gosh. I was like, I'm getting t-shirts I need a t-shirt!

DEQAH: When she's not roguely researching, Kaila Austin stays busy as a painter, a grassroots advocate, and the founder of a consulting company that helps Black neighborhoods mobilize history for their own protection.

VANESSA: Kaila, who's mixed-race, grew up in Indianapolis. When she left as a young adult, she had no intention of ever coming back. But in 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, she returned.

KAILA: I was depressed to be back here. Because I have so many negative, uh, memories attached to it. My mother's family was pretty deeply involved in the Klan, actually, and so the stories that were told to me about what it means to be Black, were very derogatory. Right. /And so it was a very long path to kind of recover that and history is how I've been able to do so, right?

DEQAH: Kaila embarked on a new project to try and reconnect with the city that she had previously written off.

KAILA: I just started inviting people into my studio, and I'm doing their portraits and I'm recording their oral histories, / that's also how I meet Ms. Flinora

VANESSA: Ms. Flinora Frazier.

KAILA: And she's just this little tiny, old lady, and she's very sassy.

DEQAH: Ms. Flinora told Kaila about the place where she grew up, Norwood, a small neighborhood about 5 miles Southeast from Indiana Avenue.

KAILA: Norwood is less than half a mile from the house I was born in and no one has ever talked about Norwood.

VANESSA: Here's an excerpt of Ms. Flinora that Kaila recorded for her oral history project.

MS. FRAZIER: There was but one, maybe two telephones in the neighborhood, but everybody knew everything. How did the word get around? You do something down the street, when you get home, mom knew it and you could get a spanking anywhere and then get home and have another one. So you tried to be good. The neighbors would look out for your kids. Nobody had to worry. And you never went hungry. You could eat at anybody's house. It was a very caring community, I tell you, so much different from now.

VANESSA: The more Kaila learned from Ms. Flinora about her history, the more it drew her in.

KAILA: She's 92 years old, her grandfather, he escaped slavery when he was 13 years old and joined the U.S. colored troops.

ENTER CIVIL WAR MUSIC

DEQAH: This regiment of African Americans suffered unimaginable losses during the Civil and American Indian Wars.

KAILA: 5,000 colored troops leave and 950 of them make it back home.

VANESSA: Ms. Flinora's grandfather - Reverend Sydney Penick was one of those men. He and many others in his regiment made Norwood their home.

KAILA: The lots over in this part of town are only \$50. You got probably \$25 bucks to throw in on a house with your best friend. And that's what they do, right? They penny party, everybody throws in \$10. They buy the lot for the church. You know, everybody puts in \$10 more dollars, they buy the barn.

FADE OUT CIVIL WAR MUSIC

DEQAH: Ms. Flinora.

MS. FRAZIER: That's before my time, but I've heard the stories. Grandfather, I guess he formed a church, and it's still there

VANESSA: In 1889, Ms. Flinora's grandfather establishes the Penick African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in the neighborhood.

DEQAH: Ransom Place, the thriving Black neighborhood along Indiana Avenue, helps Norwood grow.

KAILA: Ransom place is essentially Norwood's mother. Right? So it's sending its doctors over. It's sending its lawyers over. It's sending its teachers over.

ADA HARRIS, A BRILLIANT AND SASSY WOMAN

VANESSA: One of those teachers — Ms. Ada Harris — left an indelible mark on the neighborhood.

DEQAH: Madam CJ Walker is an inspirational story — but Ada Harris was a pioneer, too.

KAILA: ADA Harris patented the straightening iron in 1893. Ada Harris is also the only black woman in the state of Indiana who goes to the world's fair in Paris. We've got a picture of her shaking hands with Queen Victoria.

VANESSA: She applied her world-class ingenuity toward her new home.

KAILA: She comes out to Norwood and starts Norwood Colored school number five. In 1889, when she gets there, there are less than 15 students in the school, right? Within 10 years, there's 150 students in the Norwood Colored school. Ninety percent of the black people in Norwood had been previously enslaved. So I'm sure Ada Harris was knocking on doors. Like, "Hey, that baby needs to be in this damn classroom and not in that farm working. We've had enough farm shit." You know, like that's, that's just how I imagine. Ada harris was a sassy woman.

ENTER OLD TIMEY MUSIC

DEQAH: Kaila says Ada didn't just turn the school around, she became Norwood's unofficial mayor.

KAILA: She runs the community land trust. She writes out all the legal paperwork and she also has being raised in ransom place access to the NAACP and all of these organizations over there that Norwood doesn't have access to because they're isolated.

VANESSA: Ada helps Norwood become one of the most affluent free black communities in the Midwest.

KAILA: By 1912, they have a black library, they have their own marshal. They have their own fire station. They also have a lot of boarding houses and hotels and hostels. Every house had fruit trees in their yards. There are no lynchings within the boundaries of Norwood, not one. That's a big deal. Norwood sounds like a utopia.

MUSIC ENDS

DEQAH: Of course, no utopia can last.

VANESSA: As we discussed in our previous episode,

SOMBER MUSIC STARTS

the Klu Klux Klan was solidifying its grip throughout the state from the 1910s on.

KAILA: There are 250,000 Klansmen by 1927. And they set up all around the borders of Norwood. We have a clan distribution map, and every X on it is a thousand clan members. I mean and it's a dense forest around Norwood. / Mayor Duvall, literally in the Klan very open about it, super active clansman. / Indianapolis essentially starts to dismantle this community. They take the marshall, defund the trolley system, they remove Ada Harris, as the principal of the Norwood colored school, she had been the principal there for nearly 30 years.

DEQAH: During this time when the Klan is dismantling Norwood, Ada Harris tries to prevent her life's work from being undone.

KAILA: In 1925, Ada Harris has a stroke and she writes up her will. She leaves five lots to the Indianapolis Parks Commission. This is the lot with their library, their community center, their kindergarten classes, and their park on it, under the agreement that they are going to build the *Ada B. Harris Center for the Benefit of Negro Children* in Norwood.

VANESSA: In 1927, Ada Harris dies. The Parks Commission sends an attorney to assess Norwood.

KAILA: The attorney comes back and says "it is neither needed nor necessary for there to be a center for the benefit of Negro children. Auction everything off." They auctioned it all off; in 1928, they bulldoze everything. They flattened everything. And by the time Ms. Flenora's born in 1929, there's nothing left.

DEQAH: Wow.

SOMBER MUSIC ENDS

DEQAH: In all of Indianapolis, you can't find a historical marker about Ada Harris.

KAILA: Norwood's tried to get markers in their community and like they have their rejection letters. / Miss Flinora applied for it in 1997, her grandfather's church was 110 years old. They have complete archives / They have everything that you needed to put

a historic marker in place. What you meant to say is you don't value black people and their structures and their impact.

VANESSA: Kaila and others have started pressuring the city to create a park in Ada's honor.

KAILA: I'm going to press 'em to have it done by 2027, cause that's a hundred years. And that's about time.

DEQAH: It's about damn time.

DEQAH: But that's not all Kaila's been up to. She's been talking to Ms. Flinora's neighbors, and uncovering some pretty amazing stories.

VANESSA: Fifteen families in Norwood still live in the houses that their grandfathers built at the end of the Civil War, and all fifteen have kept extensive archives of their family histories - photographs, freedom documents, even civil war uniforms.

KAILA: None of the neighbors knew that the other ones had these too. So we've discovered all this history, we've been reintroducing the neighbors to their own story. People my age had no idea about any of this. They're like, "grandma, what do you mean? We had the first black library?" They're like, "oh yeah, I guess we forgot to mention it to ya." You know, "what do you mean, my great, great grandfather's civil war uniform is here in the trunk and nobody mentioned it to me?" And they're like, "well, we didn't think you'd think it was important."

ENTER MOVING MUSIC

We stopped telling stories and it's because of trauma. Right. It's because it hurts, but not all parts of the story hurt. / Some parts of the story are beautiful. / Over the last year, we've been able to give them their story back. And that's causing some real transformational changes. They're showing up for themselves.

DEQAH: Recently, Norwood showed up for itself, big time.

NORWOOD SHOWS UP FOR ITSELF

VANESSA: Since the mid-20th century, Norwood has suffered from many of the same socio-economic forces that have throttled African American neighborhoods across the country.

DEQAH: However, Indianapolis neglected Norwood to an extreme degree, even by American standards. Here's Ms. Flinora Frazier again.

MS. FRAZIER: We had outdoor toilets. Some people had septic tanks. If you could afford it. I remember my brothers carried drinking water from three houses down the street.

KAILA: Norwood, doesn't get roads until 1971. It didn't give them access to medical coverage, they didn't get gas and water.

VANESSA: Over the decades, the city of Indianapolis has built some things in Norwood. A park, a firehouse, a jail. In 2020, Kaila discovered that the city wanted to build a morgue on a plot of land that had been the family home of John Hardrick.

DEQAH: Hardrick's portraits, still lifes, and murals achieved wide acclaim; in the late 1920s, a Hardrick piece even hung in the Smithsonian.

MUSIC ENDS

VANESSA: Kaila and others showed up at public meetings and made some good trouble. Judith Thomas, the Deputy Mayor of Neighborhood Engagement for the city, remembers it well.

JUDITH: We went and talked to the neighborhood and, got our hats handed to us, what we were going to build was an a, on a historic piece of land. but we listened.

VANESSA: The people of Norwood prevailed over the city.

KAILA: They officially canceled all, all of the morgue buildings within Norwood.

DEQAH: Since the fight over the morgue, the city of Indianapolis has started mapping Black and Brown places throughout the city. That's a big deal.

JUDITH: We know where they are, who was there. And we're looking at development projects; we're respectful of what was there before.

DEQAH: The city will now think twice before building new projects over historic sites.

HOPEFUL MUSIC STARTS

VANESSA: Kaila's hopeful, but also wary. She understands both the power - and the limitations - of history as a force for change.

KAILA: This is like a very basic hierarchy of needs, like right? You can't build when you're fighting, you can't build, when you don't have food, you can't build when your environment is toxic, but one thing history does provide that is at the very core...right at the bottom of the hierarchy of needs...is a sense of self.

DEQAH: Kaila has been working to return this sense of self to Norwood. A short drive away, near Indiana Avenue, another Black Hoosier is on the same mission.

MUSIC ENDS

PAULA BROOKS, COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

PAULA: To really have a good sense of self. You need to be able to feel those who came before you. When those buildings are taken away, that connection is taken away.

VANESSA: That's Paula Brooks. She's a community advocate for environmental justice.

DEQAH: Paula has helped neighborhoods reject facilities that would generate noxious fumes. She's fought for safer and more accessible streets.

PAULA: My activism really stems from the fact that decision-makers, policymakers, and others not seeing the humanity of the long-term residents that live here.

VANESSA: She's also part of the third generation in her family to live in Ransom Place.

PAULA: There's not too many people in this neighborhood that knows the streets and the feeling, the history like I do.

PAULA: And that green one right there, that's Miss Spears' house.

DEQAH: When I was in Indianapolis, I asked Paula if she would meet me in Ransom Place, the neighborhood that Jean Spears and others got landmarked decades before. She explained that the neighborhood is actually much bigger than the historic district; it includes areas like Fayette Street and Flanner House Homes.

PAULA: This is the only neighborhood downtown that Black people own real estate. Just about every black person that lives in the neighborhood owns their home.

VANESSA: However, this homeownership hasn't safeguarded people from disruptive developments. While the landmarked blocks have been kept safe, other blocks in the

neighborhood have been forgotten — and left vulnerable. Over the years, historic homes were knocked down. Small businesses gave way to an unattractive strip mall. Safe streets became high-speed throughways.

DEQAH: When Indiana university Health demolished a road to install a monorail for students and staff, it pushed traffic coming from the interstate onto the street where Paula's mom lived.

PAULA: My mom had to move from her house, they had put in the monorail and had her backin' down the traffic going 40 miles an hour blindly and nobody cared!

DEQAH: Even when developers do construct needed buildings, like housing, they often block access to streets that used to run directly through the neighborhood.

PAULA: Ninth street, right. It used to continue all the way through the Avenue as well. So they built this building. But they didn't really think about, again, the connectivity. So just trying to get across is it's not easy.

DEQAH: I really feel the disconnectivity here. It doesn't feel like a neighborhood as much.

VANESSA: Last year, a new project proposed for Indiana Avenue came across Paula's desk. It was for student housing that would have disconnected the neighborhood even more.

DEQAH: Paula started calling people in Indianapolis to form the Indiana Avenue Coalition. It pressured the city to reject the project.

VANESSA: The coalition was able to stop this development. But Paula is clear that her work isn't just about preserving old buildings and preventing new ones -- it's about advocating for the right kind of new development.

MUSIC ENTERS

PAULA: There's a tendency to want to turn us into museum relics, to place this area, like in a time capsule, and not really looking at how the community, how we are today as a community. What people want is to walk on the streets and feel safe. More green space. More transportation options. You respect the history, you have to definitely build new. You have to look towards the future. So that's a fine line to have to walk.

MUSIC ENDS

CLAUDIA POLLEY WALKS IN HER MOTHER'S FOOTSTEPS

DEQAH: Jean Spears' daughter, Claudia Polley, walks that line every day.

CLAUDIA: How can we ensure that any new development along Indiana avenue, responds to the history of the people that were there before?

VANESSA: Claudia isn't just a preservationist. She's started a new non-profit, the Urban Legacy Lands Initiative (or ULLI), to help transform the Avenue.

CLAUDIA: using the past as a catalyst for the future for urban legacy lands in jeopardy. The Andrew Mellon foundation gave us money to create a new kind of CDC, a community development corporation, except this is a cultural heritage development corporation.

DEQAH: ULLI wants to work WITH developers, not against them.

CLAUDIA: We want them to make money. We want them to be successful. We want vitality in the neighborhood. We just want it to be of the quality and character that the neighborhood should have, a bit more respectful of where it is and how it is. / And we're bringing some philanthropic dollars to the table that, regular developers could not have access to.

VANESSA: Claudia hopes her initiative can be the catalyst to bring back a thriving business community along Indiana Avenue.

CLAUDIA: And there's a reason why small shops have to charge as much as they do because of their overhead. Maybe there's a way that ULLI as a nonprofit can help subsidize in some way, and it's a smart investment. It's not just handing out, no, if you are helped through the process and you're given money to start, and you are given all the things that you need to have to be successful, maybe, maybe there won't be that, that failure rate that we often see in ground floor spaces in new development.

DEQAH: I asked Claudia to meet me on Indiana Avenue and help me imagine the future of this once vibrant community.

[SOUND OF TRUCK CHANGING GEARS]

CLAUDIA: It's kind of the way I feel in the morning. It takes a minute to get from first to second.

DEQAH: We met on a loud, busy intersection, where cars whip by you on their way to and from the interstate.

CLAUDIA: Because the interstate exit is right up there and you come off the interstate and just zoom down West Street. I know because I occasionally do it, and, but I think about how bad it is when I'm doing it. But we need to be much more thoughtful about how we create our urban neighborhoods and respect our urban neighborhoods.

DEQAH: The streets here are an affront to what the neighborhood had been / and the buildings? They don't do much to help either.

VANESSA: Even now, developers still come to the Avenue with plans that show little regard for the community's past or present. With her initiative, Claudia is hoping to change the conversation from the start.

CLAUDIA: Just this past week we went before the Indianapolis historic preservation commission, something that we hadn't known was coming up on the docket, a development proposal for a block just up the street here, which has been vacant for many years.

DEQAH: The proposal would have provided housing the neighborhood needs – but, Claudia and her colleagues could see right away that its design clashed with its surroundings.

CLAUDIA: So we are now going to work with the development team as well as the community to help bring in the people that we can help bring in to make this work.

VANESSA: The Urban Legacy Land Initiative convenes people in the community, business owners, developers, university representatives, and city officials - and not just for one-off projects.

CLAUDIA: They want to bring back the vitality of the Avenue. It was a center of commerce. It was a center of community coming together, whether it was a barber shop or a liquor store or a hair salon, grocery stores, there were all sorts of places to go and do and be together. And that was the Avenue. We'd like to get that back.

DEQAH: Let's say it's 2052. What's here? What's changed? What does it look like? How does it sound?

CLAUDIA: There'll be people here. There'll be people living here, playing here, shopping here. It will be a vibrant community once again.

DEQAH: Yeah. I think the avenue looking all, you know, kind of just hustle and bustle again and a little bit more, you know, poppin'.

CLAUDIA: Poppin' is the word [laughs] And it will be a section of Indianapolis that people take a great deal of pride upon because we've maintained the history of what was here, who was here, and how it was. It's reconciliation and moving forward and a healing.

CREDITS MUSIC STARTS

VANESSA: Claudia is clearly walking in her mother's footsteps. So are Paula Brooks and Kaila Austin. They're all fighting to reclaim and protect the history that once was, and to set a path for a brighter future.

END CREDITS

DEQAH: Thank you for listening to urban roots, brought to you by Urbanist Media. Your hosts are me, Deqah Hussein-Wetzel and Vanessa Quirk

VANESSA: Big thanks to Indiana Humanities for providing funding for this series.

DEQAH: Thanks also to Claudia Polley, Kaila Austin, and Paula Brooks who helped make this episode possible.

VANESSA: Connor Lynch edited and Andrew Callaway mixed this episode. Our THEME music is by Adaam James Levin-Areddy. You can check out Adaam's band, Lost Amsterdam at AmsterdamLost.com

DEQAH: Alright, this was the last episode of season two y'all! And it's time for some real talk. We make this podcast as a labor of love. So far, it's only been possible with the help of grants - and because me and Vanessa and Connor all donate our time.

VANESSA: If you want a season three, or if you want us to come to your community to tell little-known stories, we need your help! We're looking for sponsors - big and small - to help us keep the podcast going.

DEQAH: We're also hoping to grow our Patreon community. If you join and contribute, you'll get access to some sweet bonus content we're cooking up behind the scenes. And if Patreon isn't your thing, you can always donate to us via Venmo, or PayPal at Urbanist Media.

VANESSA: Every dollar helps - so thank you in advance for helping us to tell stories of people and places that deserve to be saved. We want nothing more than to keep bringing them to you. So, on that note, hit the good people with our tagline Deqah!

DEQAH: Urban Roots. Looking back so we can move forward.