

AIN'T NO BACK TO A MERRY-GO-ROUND: DESEGREGATING GLEN ECHO AMUSEMENT PARK

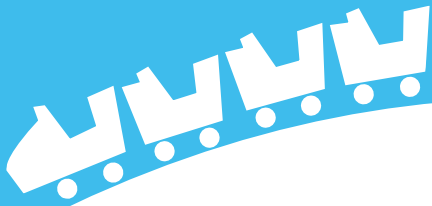
BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG

At Glen Echo Amusement Park in suburban Bethesda, Maryland, in the 1950s, squealing children rode rabbits, reindeer and tigers on the carousel, crashed bumper cars with abandon and spun themselves silly on the Tilt-O-Whirl. But only white children.

Black people were blocked from entering. “It’s strictly for white patrons,” deputized security guard Francis Collins told Laurence Henry, a 26-year-old Howard University student, as Henry stood at the gates of the amusement park one hot, humid day in June 1960 trying to get in. What followed was a summer-long campaign by Henry and his classmates—plus a group of nearby allies—to bring down the racial barrier.

Howard students banded with residents from the nearby Bannockburn neighborhood, many of them Jewish. Side by side, students and suburbanites, many pushing strollers, spent weeks in the sweltering sun picketing outside Glen Echo. Ultimately, ahead of the park’s 1961 spring opening, owners announced Glen Echo would be open to all. The seminal moment in U.S. history—well before civil rights activists’ sit-ins and freedom rides accelerated countrywide—is the subject of a documentary by Ilana Trachtman. As a producer and director, Trachtman has created Emmy award-winning nonfiction programs for PBS, HBO Family and Discovery on topics including the legacy of slavery in Latin America and activism among Gulf Coast shrimpers. Her personal projects include “Praying with Lior”—a portrait of a boy with Down syndrome preparing for his bar mitzvah—and “Mariachi High”—a year in the life of a South Texas high school champion mariachi ensemble.

“I’m attracted to rich worlds populated by good people who want decency,” Trachtman said. “I have to fall in love with the characters, and all of my films are always, always character-driven.” In “Ain’t No



Back to a Merry-Go-Round,” Glen Echo is very much a character in its own right, one Trachtman first encountered in the ’70s and ’80s, growing up in Montgomery County, Maryland, near the then-abandoned park turned arts center operated by the National Park Service. (Privately owned Glen Echo closed in 1968 after declining attendance.)

As a child, Trachtman attended theater classes and performed in plays at the center. Walking through Glen Echo, she imagined the fun and merriment of the bygone era, smelling the popcorn and hearing the happy notes of carnival music.

“We imbue places with meaning,” Trachtman says. “For some people, it’s a childhood bedroom, or maybe a particular hike in the woods. It’s your magical place, espe-

cially as a child. And so, that’s what Glen Echo was to me. It was a window to this beautiful, wholesome, happy aesthetic and interesting Americana. It was like peering into a Norman Rockwell painting, and probably the most real window that I had into the past.”

Trachtman’s chance encounter with a Glen Echo park ranger decades later, however, shook the very foundation of her perception. In winter 2008, Trachtman and her fiancée (now husband) toured the park as a possible wedding venue. Jewish U.S. Park Ranger Sam Swersky, who possessed a wealth of Glen Echo stories, told the couple

about Bannockburn resident and former protester Hyman Bookbinder, past AFL-CIO lobbyist and assistant to the Secretary of Commerce in the Kennedy administration.

Later in life, Bookbinder—also the American Jewish Committee’s longtime Washington representative—told Swersky during daily Glen Echo walks with his wife, Ida, that the picketing was the proudest moment of his career. Upon hearing about the protest, Trachtman was shocked and even a little ashamed at what she calls her own ignorance.

Photo: Courtesy of George Meany Library/Ilana Trachtman

On August 17, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and A. Phillip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (third and fourth from left, respectively), representing African Americans employed on Pullman Company trains, were among those who picketed outside the park.



Photo: Courtesy of Richard Cook

Glen Echo Park entrance: One of many “trolley parks” in the United States accessible by public transit, Glen Echo was the last stop on a streetcar line that ran from Union Station, Washington, D.C., until 1962.



“On the bus we’re put in the back—
But there ain’t no back/To a merry-
go-round! Where’s the horse/For a kid
that’s black?”

At the gates of Glen Echo

In the D.C. area in the ’50s and ’60s, segregation was part of daily life, with Black-only schools and bathrooms and white-only water fountains and lunch counters. Bannockburn was different. It began in 1946 as a collectively owned community fueled by utopian postwar dreams. Families moved into mid-century modern homes on the site of a former hilly golf course just east of Glen Echo. Many of the progressive residents—among them a sizable number of Jews—had migrated to Maryland from up north to work in the federal government.

In February 1960, Howard students watched along with the rest of the country as four Black college students at the “whites only” Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, asked for service and refused to leave when denied.

The protest inspired six students from Howard’s Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), a student-run protest group

“It was suddenly having a sense of the fullness of what Glen Echo was—this wholesome place of delight for Washingtonians, and simultaneously a place of exclusion and a place of pain and a place of actual real ugliness in terms of what humans can do,” she says.

She knew she had to make a film.

Trachtman began her research in 2013 with a DVD Swersky had made of a reunion of Glen Echo protesters he helped organize in the early 2000s. She dug into archives—in the Rockville Public Library, Glen Echo Town Hall and the Library of Congress—perusing newspaper clippings, photographs, and

audio and video recordings.

“Then I tracked down and talked to every single person that I could find who had been there,” she says. Finding the over 100 people she interviewed entailed scouring phonebooks, neighborhood rosters, and church and synagogue records.

Filming started in 2014, and for a decade Trachtman worked on her passion project alongside her other film work. “Ain’t No Back to a Merry-Go-Round” premiered in May 2024 at the Maryland Film Festival. She took the title from Langston Hughes’ 1942 poem “Merry-Go-Round.” It reads,



Photo: Courtesy of National Park Service

Installed at Glen Echo in 1921, the hand-carved carousel has been restored and is still used. Although all other rides closed in 1968, the park is now operated under the management of the Montgomery County government and the National Park Service. The Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture is a nonprofit that serves as a home to 13 resident artists and organizations.

aimed at ending segregation, to stage a similar sit-in at Cherrydale Drug Fair in Arlington, Virginia. Within two weeks, lunch counters Arlington-wide were desegregated. Next, they turned to Glen Echo, known for its catchy radio jingle and “Come one, come all” print ads that they knew didn’t apply to them.

Some 60 NAG members joined Henry at Glen Echo’s gates in 1960 along with primarily white suburbanites, many of whom had appealed to local government for years to pressure park owners to desegregate.

Clutching tickets purchased by white protesters, Black protesters streamed into the park. Several sat on the carousel. Arrests followed. But students—and Bannockburners—returned the next day, and the day after that, for nine hot weeks. As they marched and sang, they faced enraged counterprotesters, including American Nazi Party members.

“The faces were so angry,” says Tina Clarke, one of the Black protesters, in the film. She recalls riding the streetcar past Glen Echo, nose pressed to the glass. White kids laughed and swam in

the pool. On the picket lines, “the eyes would be bulgin’, face all red and it’s like they were like crazy people, just calling you filthy names.”

Bannockburn resident Esther Delaplaine, a white Philadelphia transplant, took her five kids to the picket lines. Bannockburners brought lemonade and cookies to share. “The youngsters I think were wondering, whose picket line is this?” she says in the film. Students were cautious but welcomed residents’ support.

Teenagers participated too, and lifelong friendships formed between Black and

white protestors. Bannockburner Loren Weinberg was 17 when he ran messages between protestors after school and his job at a D.C. aquarium shop. “The Road to Hell is Paved with Little Rocks,” read his picket sign, referring to the segregationist resistance at Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas, three years earlier.

“Racism was no stranger to me, I saw it all around me,” Weinberg said at his home in Boulder. Glen Echo “was a big part of my life. I was proud of what I was doing.” Weinberg went on to picket at the nearby Bethesda-Hiser Theatre, which also desegregated after protests. Later, he became a flagship faculty member at Federal City College (now the University of the District of Columbia), which served primarily working-class Black students.

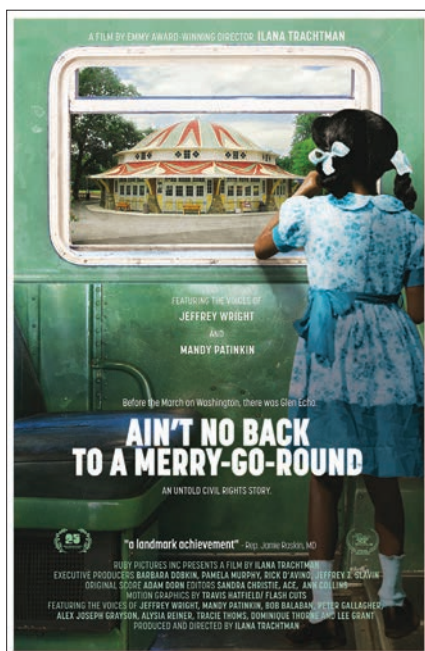
New York University political science professor emeritus Martin Schain was a college junior when he and colleagues at his D.C. summer trade union job joined picketers. “It became a kind of habit—every day after work I went out and picketed,” he tells B’nai B’rith. Schain rode the carousel with Howard students and was arrested. “It actually became a badge of honor,” he adds. “When I look back, I really feel honored to have been a part of that movement. It gave me a wonderful feeling about America.”

The protest gained national attention—congressmen participated; Sammy Davis Jr. promised to put on a benefit show for demonstrators. Finally, on March 14, 1961, a Washington Afro-American headline shocked protestors by announcing, “Glen Echo says come one, come all and means it,” signaling an unexpected end to what many had thought would be months more of picketing. “Glen Echo gave me a determination to not accept being mistreated because of my color,” Deborah Swedenburg Willis, who lived near the park, says in the film. Protesters Black and white went on to participate in freedom rides,



Photo: Courtesy of National Park Service, Glen Echo Archives/Ilana Trachtman

Park security guard Francis J. Collins encounters civil rights activist (and Howard University student) Marvous Saunders, who had purchased a ticket and mounted the carousel, leading to his arrest along with other protestors on June 30, 1960. Speaking of these nonviolent actions, Saunders remembered: “We were just trying to make life a little better for those folks who happened to be Black.”



Relying on sources including eyewitness accounts, Ilana Trachtman’s documentary, “Ain’t No Back to a Merry-Go-Round” tells the story of how Blacks and Jews worked together to successfully integrate Glen Echo Park.

endure arrests and inspire others in the civil rights movement.

“Press on, press on, that is a lesson from Glen Echo,” says Clarke, who joined the picketing from her Black community of Jerusalem, near Poolsville in Maryland, some miles from the park.

For Trachtman, the film’s message that ordinary peoples’ actions—especially diverse groups uniting—can drive significant, positive change feels even more salient today than when she started making her film in 2014, when Barack Obama was president, she says.

“It’s just so easy to say, I’m not capable, I’m not as talented, that’s not my path, or nothing that I do is going to make a difference,” says Trachtman. But “every single person has the capacity to be the change. We have to because we can, because there is nobody else.”

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