

Topeka reflects on Brown v. Board legacy

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Dozens of residents braved unseasonably cool weather Saturday to cap off a two-week-plus celebration of the 67th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision at Every Plaza, where organizers sought to promote and honor the legacy of students who attended once-segregated schools in Topeka.

It is the second time such an event took place, said organizer Marty Patterson, with the first iteration occurring in 2019. But the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted last year's ceremony and organizers elected to hold a dozen events over much of May to honor the court case's legacy while still promoting social distancing.

Speakers noted the importance of reflecting and preserving the legacy of the Brown decision, especially for a city where desegregation looked far different than it did in many other parts of the Midwest and south.

When Pamela Johnson Betts was growing up, the notion that Topeka was the epicenter for one of the core building blocks in the push for desegregation nationally never dawned on her.

Johnson Betts was friends with many of the students and families in the case, including Linda Brown Thompson, whose experience of having to walk by a whites-only school in order to be bused to Monroe Elementary prompted the lawsuit.

But Johnson Betts said she the family rarely talked about the case and she noted the lawsuit which prompted national headlines had far fewer reverberations in Topeka.

"People moving here have such an interest in Brown," she said. "But I can tell you, that living in Topeka, families did



Attendees watch a video performance at an event commemorating the 67th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision at Every Plaza. PHOTOS BY ANDREW BAHL/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

not much talk about Brown and what it had done for civil rights. We of course knew about the case but for some reason it had no real proximity or relevance to Topeka lives."

But when Johnson Betts went to college and saw the now infamous photo of her childhood friend, Brown Thompson, outside the U.S. Supreme Court, the significance began to sink in.

"Holy Moses, that was an awakening," she said.

Since then, the effort to preserve and promote the case's history in Topeka has expanded. That included saving the once-decrepit Monroe Elementary from a private sale which could have led to its demolition.

Instead, a group of activists, led by the youngest Brown daughter, Cheryl Brown Henderson, saved the building, and it is now a National Park Service site. NPS rangers note it is set to reopen to the public on June 1 after being shut-

tered for over a year due to COVID-19.

Still, Patterson said it was important to highlight the stories of students from that era. Roughly 20 students from a half dozen Topeka schools attended the event and were honored during the proceedings.

That included Martha Amado, one of a handful surviving plaintiffs in the Brown v. Board case.

Amado recalled fond memories of her time at Buchanan Elementary School, including her principal Mrs. Montgomery, and a range of teachers who made a lasting imprint. Patterson noted that the quality of teaching in Black schools was often higher, meaning many white families pushed to send their children their after de-segregation.

Less happy memories, however, included white students spitting on Amado and her friends as they walked by a whites-only school to get to Buchanan. Because of this, Amado stuck with her



Dancers from the Stephen Massey Dance Theatre perform Saturday during an event commemorating the 67th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education at Every Plaza.

old school, even after desegregation.

"They asked us if we wanted to go to Loman Hill," she said. "We said no — we didn't have to go."

There was still plenty of focus during the event on the present and future. The Shawnee County Health Department had a mobile vaccination event on-site, and the local chapter of the Black Nurses Association was screening attendees for hypertension.

"We recognize the disparities that exist here as far as health care," said Patricia Joyce, president of the Black Nurses Association.

And Johnson Betts said modern racial inequalities, such as the police killings of George Floyd and other Black residents, have garnered attention because of videos and photos being posted and shared online — something not available to her generation.

"What was unseen was unheard," Johnson Betts said. "And it went on for decades."

But mainly, Patterson noted the importance of ensuring younger generations understand the legacy of the Brown v. Board decision, especially given the dwindling number of individuals with first person accounts of the era.

"This is not a Black story," she said. "This is an American history story."