

Two Harolds: A gay, interracial couple in an age of bigotry

By Justin Wm. Moyer
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON (AP) - Estate agent Verna Clayborne takes a seat in the dining room of an expansive 16th Street Heights home and sighs.

The two Harolds have tired her out. It's Clayborne's job to get rid of the stuff of the deceased. The couple who lived in the house for more than half a century - Harold Herman, a white man who died in 2016 at 87, and Harold Mays, a black man who died almost exactly a year later at 81 - had a lot of it.

These aren't your typical finds in the home of retirees. Clayborne is sitting amid a pile of antiques and memorabilia - paintings, LPs, books, coins, stamps, personal correspondence - worth, she estimates, \$500,000. These objects, curated lovingly by two collectors in love for over five decades, offer glimpses of what it was like to be black and gay in America when it was dangerous to be either.

"They knew how to live and lived well," she said of the Harolds. The Harolds met in New England before moving in together in post-integration, pre-riot Washington in 1965. One was a black Army veteran from St. Louis, the other a white college professor from Pennsylvania. Though family and acquaintances say they were a private couple, they could not help being pioneers.

They later ran Two Harolds Antiques in Alexandria for more than a decade and owned a collection of thousands of signed first editions so extensive that they kept an in-house card catalogue. The books are varied - works by gay raconteur Quentin Crisp amid Janet Evanovich thrillers.

Much of what's left in the Harolds' home doesn't explicitly bear their mark. There's large black-and-white prints of the last century's black royalty: Harry Belafonte, Jesse Jackson, Lou Rawls, Cicely Tyson. Another photo includes two faces lesser known outside the Beltway in the 1960s and 1970s, but inescapable within it: Marion Barry and his first wife, Blantie Evans, on a beach.

But every collection reveals the collector, and in other ephemera the Harolds left behind, they come into sharper focus. One snapshot shows Mays shaking Belafonte's hand at a Politics and Prose. Another shows their modest wedding, held in 2013 at what looks like a courthouse following the legalization of same-sex marriage - after they had already been a couple for almost 50 years.

Mays was also a diligent correspondent, pounding out letters to authors he admired on a manual typewriter left behind on the home's second floor. He would read a book by, say, acclaimed poet Nikki Giovanni, then strike up a correspondence with her. There are notes from Fanny Ellison, the widow of "Invisible Man" author Ralph Ellison, and famed black poets Rita Dove and Gwendolyn Brooks.

More substantial letters the Harolds received speak directly to the struggles of black artists in America.

In a 1990 letter, novelist Raymond Andrews - whose work offered a vision of "a world in which blacks and whites sometimes hate and mistreat one another but ultimately arrive at an understanding," according to a 1983 review in The Washington Post - effused about his career.

In another letter dated two years later, Andrews's brother Benny wrote to say Andrews was dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at 57.

"I'm writing to say that my brother, Raymond, committed suicide," the letter read. "It is always good to hear that people liked Ray's works."

Another exchange was with Audrey Lee, a little-known black author who wrote two novels, "The Clarion People" and "The Workers," in the 1960s. The books have since gone out of print: Mays apparently wrote Lee to ask what she was up to two decades after their publication.

In a 1995 letter, Lee responded, opening up about her medical problems and troubles with "race discrimination, evictions, hunger and an alarmingly dishonest judiciary."

"I have spent years brooding about my experiences," she wrote. "I am awakening to the waste of years that I spent in a crawl space contemplating my wounds."

Half a set of correspondence, of course, tells only half a story, and Clayborne said she's yet to uncover diaries or other writing from either Harold. But their lives are detailed in the work of E. Patrick Johnson, chair of the African American studies department at Northwestern University, who interviewed Mays for his 2011 book "Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South."

Johnson, who wrote a play that included the Harolds' story and is producing a documentary about them, said they were "renegade figures" when they moved into their home in 1965 and lived openly as a couple.

"Even in D.C. in the '60s, they were dealing with discrimination on two fronts," he said. "They were truly remarkable."

In a 2005 interview for "Sweet Tea," Mays told Johnson he met Herman, a professor at the University of Maryland, in Providence, R.I., in 1965. The couple initially settled in Herman's D.C. apartment but moved to 16th Street Heights because other residents didn't want a black man in the building.

Their new home across from Carter Barron Amphitheatre in Rock Creek Park was in a "mostly white" neighborhood, Mays said, that would become "totally black" after the riots. Mays recalled police officers following him when he got off a bus near his home, asking for identification. When he produced ID, they still didn't believe he lived in the neighborhood and followed him home to watch him let himself in.

Meanwhile, Mays said, he was criticized by black men for choosing a white partner. "I remember someone telling me, 'Oh I didn't know you dealt in snow,'" he told Johnson. Still, he said: "I don't feel as torn up inside as I was when I was young."

"Sometimes I stop and think about all the turmoil of being black and gay in America," he said. "And it has not been as traumatic as it sounds. And I'm not sugarcoating this either. It happened and you move on. I also have to tell you that now I feel much more confident in who I am."

Agnes Jackson, Mays's 79-year-old sister, said the Harolds' relationship was accepted by both of their families. She recalled the couple showing her around Washington during a visit when she was treated like "royalty."

"They lived there so long," she said. "I guess they were accepted into the neighborhood."

Ernest Hopkins, director of legislative affairs for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and a neighbor of the Harolds, said gay men like them are rarer in the District these days. HIV devastated their generation. Now, gentrification and old age are taking a toll on those who remain.

"There were any number of older black gay men in town available to get to know," he said. "They would tell you stories, give you a sense of their lives in the '40s and '50s and '60s. Those men are largely no longer with us. They were an example of a couple that really was available."

Now that the Harolds are gone, crate-diggers and estate-sale enthusiasts are left to sort out who they were. Jim Hill, an 84-year-old former Howard University professor Clayborne brought in to help appraise the couple's extensive art collection, rested after combing through yet another box.

The estate game is getting harder, Hill said. Millennials - "millenniums," he calls them - don't have much interest in dusty old stuff.

"They're interested in the here and now," he said. But while Hill didn't know the Harolds, he can speak to the impulse that apparently ruled their lives and their home.

"While we're collecting, we're hoping someone on the other end will be interested," he said. "I'm sure they were hoping it would provide a story."

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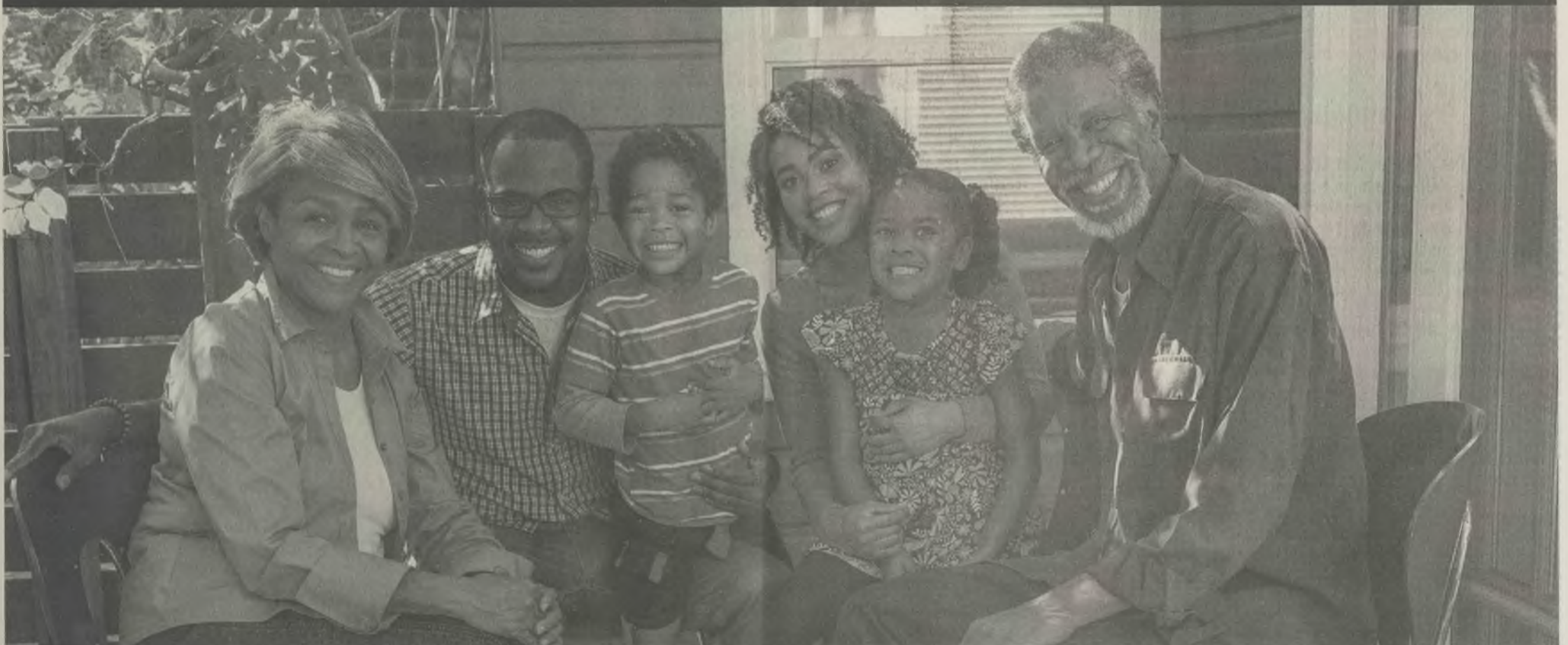
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