

My Generation

An Essay Competition
for Residents of the
District of Columbia

September 10, 2010



DC COMMISSION ON
THE ARTS & HUMANITIES

Introduction

On March 22, 2010, the Director of the Inter-American Development Bank Cultural Center, Mr. Felix Angel, received a grant as part of the Mayor's Award for Visionary Leadership in the Arts. Organized by the District of Columbia Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the Mayor's Art Awards are the highest honors the City confers upon individuals and organizations which distinguish themselves for contributing significantly to the cultural activity of the city. The purpose of the grant is to help foster the arts in Washington, DC.

In partnership with the IDB Cultural Center, Mr. Angel decided to organize a District-wide essay competition open to all ages. The competition announcement appeared twice in *The Washington City Paper*, and on the websites of the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and the IDB Cultural Center. City-wide outreach by the IDBCC made it possible for individual writers and docents to get acquainted with the contest guidelines.

The response was extraordinary in both number and quality. Forty essays were submitted by the deadline of June 30, 2010. The judges were Ms. L. Peat O'Neil, a travel writer, teacher and critic; Mr. Derek Gray, Archivist for the Washingtoniana Collection at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, and the Director of the IDB Cultural Center, Mr. Felix Angel.

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See guidelines: *My Generation Essay Competition Announcement* (September 10, 2010) at <http://events.iadb.org/calendar>

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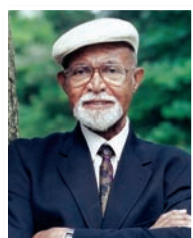
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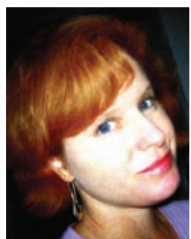
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My Generation

The row house on Holmead Place is a century old. Three stories of burgundy brick tower over concrete steps, and mismatching curtains on each level peer out at the newly constructed Giant supermarket. A rusted plaque stands guard above the mailboxes near the blue door: "This is the house the Richard rebuilt 1987-1989." You were five then. The perpetual inclination of the coming fall reflects the continuous shift of the inhabitants inside, especially in late August when you respond to Craigslist postings flurried in cyberspace announcing the room available in a "*Group house, searching roommate! Columbia Heights, blocks from metro and shopping, 15 minute walk from bars and clubs.*"

The idle August sun forces verdant patches brown and broils the swelling trashcans rummaged nightly by brazen city rats, and you move in to live among dust bunnies in forgotten corners, multiple sets of dishware, glassware, silverware, and piles of mail that still arrive for strangers long gone. The weight of the building trumps the transitory people flowing through it.

D.C. is home the day you comment to the person leaning on the high table at your side, cocktail glass in hand, "D.C. is such a transient city." You've been here long enough to feel the perennial shift, to sense roots in a rootless city. "Will you renew your lease?" asks the person next to you. "Maybe," you say, knowing the wind of Future pushes you along with the percipient clarity that eventually you'll leave. After all, D.C. is *such* a transient city.

You rush through historic corridors of buildings called Longworth, Rayburn, Russell and Hart or under florescent lighting of halls in embassies or consulting firms or think-tanks full of exotic fish-people emitting sophisticated bubbles of thoughts reflecting an expert's opinion on war, economy, debt, human rights, the Middle East, drug wars, environmental catastrophes, motherhood in the 21st century, teacher unions, pandemics, earthquakes in poor nations, and oil spills in rich ones.

You learn that standing out takes real effort when you are surrounded by people who are well-read, well-spoken, well-traveled, well-educated, well-experienced, and well-versed in various languages. You meet people who pass through for training on their way to Iraq or Afghanistan, and fleeting, light liaisons are the norm as you motion through dates in Ethiopian restaurants or bike rides in Rock Creek Park. You are trained to not dwell on the past or project into the future, and on tearless goodbyes.

You apply for internships and fellowships and scholarships, for a Master's Degree in International Development or Aid or Urban Planning or Water Sanitation, to then work abroad or join the Peace Corps or start a company or return to Washington as a verified expert. Though returning you'll find the same buildings with different people, and the places you once haunted with best friends and boy-friends are uncanny in changed light shaded over by a new administration or new foreign dignitaries or new interns ready to make something of themselves in the ramshackle house on Holmead Place where you once lived.

"Nobody is *from* D.C." You hear this all the time, and it isn't entirely true, but it's mostly true. Does your transience make you replaceable? The institutions continue in your wake.

But years later, in a bout of nostalgia when you are far away from here, you will unearth a photo. "I was there," you will say. In the image, you are pressed in, a billion bodies thick, cooled off by the frigid January air, and a vendor sells chemical hand warmers outside the Smithsonian metro stop. You tried to be closer, grasping for proximity to the apotheosis of Washington in order to swing upon the axle of the wheel of History as the eyes of the world focused in one direction. Your ears strained to hear a legendary oath that echoed over the loud speakers set up like air traffic control towers along the perimeter of the National Mall, heralded over by the snipers that appeared like dots the distance. "I was there," you say.

The flow of the city is the city itself, its *transience* forever protected by the permanence of a History that you were there for and that remains long after you are gone.

Roaming Free in Downtown Camelot

During President Kennedy's brief yet storied time in Washington, the charismatic young leader resolved to "fix up" the fading, anachronistic core of downtown. JFK and his aides had seen tatty cafes, surplus stores, and dusty-windowed restaurant supply houses along the parade route of his inauguration – even the greater landmarks of Pennsylvania Avenue such as the Old Post Office and the Willard Hotel appeared tired and sooty.

Ironically, midway through John and Jackie's reign, the worn National Theatre presented Lerner and Lowe's musical, "Camelot." The magical mood of King Arthur's England was an instant hit with the public and, not surprisingly, America became referred to as Camelot of the ruling Kennedy clan. Never mind that the National Theatre and its immediate neighborhood were slated to be pulled down in the name of a gleaming new vision of an international capital.

In 1963 and into 1964, as the slain JFK's fiefdom became the city of LBJ's Great Society, plans were drawn up in shut-away office boardrooms. Down on the stroll, however, the remnants of a peeling Victorian and Edwardian downtown – a land of wonderment to a child with imagination – doddered on, the bulldozers yet to grind, the wrecking ball yet to swing.

It was better than Disneyland, more authentic than a theme park, and more accessible than the Mall of America. In 1964 I was eleven years old and had never heard of shopping malls, Wild World, or any such fripperies. Dad had driven us in his battered Mercury wagon to Mystic Seaport, Connecticut and Williamsburg, but he wasn't about to waste his time or gasoline (at 27 cents per gallon) on a further destination like Vegas or Old Tombstone Territory.

If the struggling Senators baseball team wasn't playing, my sister and I knew just what to do. We'd curl up in Central Library at 9th and K in one of the old musty, oak window seats or we'd run down the marble steps, careful to avoid a dozing derelict along the way, and explore the fading, alluring crannies of downtown. My sister's big crushes were Richard Burton and Bob Goulet. Richard Burton wondered, "What do simple folk do all day in their busy little shops?" As two wee folk beguiled by the palette of strange people living and meandering through the crowded thoroughfares of F and G Streets, we loved to poke around, even if we bought nothing more meaningful than a two-cent hunk of Flee's Dubble Bubblegum from People's Drugs.

Unaccompanied, I once sped across a short graveled lot, past the Hippodrome peep show and the Central Lunch. I found refuge from an unshaven, knife-wielding man by ducking into the creepy Hopwood's Furniture repository. Rows of bentwood chairs hung from rusted stamped-tin ceiling, with garlands of dangling cobwebs hanging from their legs. Coughing, I slipped out a side door onto 8th Street and almost tripped over a Chinese man emptying boiling steam from a huge vat of noodles.

The next time we went out, I warned Sis that there was nothing of interest in Hopwood's. The whole place reminded me of the interior of the Bates Motel in the movie *Psycho*, which we had seen a couple of years earlier at the beautiful Loew's Palace Theatre. Our next foray took us down Skid Row on 9th Street, below New York Avenue, past the dust-laden windows of the George Friend Bookstore and similar emporia, which were chucked full of fascinating *LIFE* magazines from the 30s and 40s, and portrayed thugs and movie stars in fedoras and corsages respectively. Soon down at the old barn of a Surplus shop, Sis bought a heavy, cable-knit sweater for \$1.25. "Wow, that's steep," she grumbled. Heading back up the 9th Street hill, we giggled at the garish Gaiety girlie posters.

We wound up on F Street gawking through the windows of Harris Jewelers, Urdong's, L. Frank's, and Jelleff's. We then scarfed down milkshakes and BLT sandwiches at Murphy's lunch counter. More than youth has vanished with the decades. A simpler, sweeter way of life is gone, even as it was in Downtown's busy little shops.

Often, I am asked if D.C. is my home, and although I'm told that I was born in Pittsburgh, PA (I was brought here by my great-grandparents at the age of four), I remember being here always, and have experienced a marvelous, delightful life as a citizen of the District of Columbia.

My first memories are of exciting days on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue at Seventh Street, NW. My great-grandmother always took me by streetcar down Seventh Street as far as we could go, and then we would get off and walk down to Pennsylvania Avenue to watch "the Parade." To a child, the Parade did not need a real reason - there were many annual celebrations here: the circus coming to town brought the elephants and the clowns; General Eisenhower and General McArthur both came and were enhanced by marching bands, floats, and marchers dressed in colorful costumes, even representatives from other parts of the military services. All Parades were great fun and we always stood in the best spot - Seventh and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW.

When I was eight years old, I recall standing outside the Union Station watching a tearful crowd, while waiting for the body of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He had died away from home and was being brought back by train. My great-grandmother and others were in tears - thus I thought he was a relative or close friend since everyone was so upset about his passing away. Death was not yet a permanent part of my vocabulary so I just stood with Granny and waited, knowing this was a very important day.

Soon after this experience, we listened to the Inauguration of the new President Harry S. Truman on the radio and realized that the national play was a scene in our town.

On Sunday afternoons, we watched the airplanes take off and land as the airport in Virginia was expanded; all of this was down the Channel Drive from where the trucks were bringing in dirt on which to build the Pentagon. The man on the radio said it would be the world's biggest office building and the only one with five sides. Wow, and it wasn't even on Pennsylvania Avenue. The importance of D.C. to my generation became clearer as I grew into my teens and we began to see television and witness others coming here to visit things of world-wide importance.

Often we visited the Smithsonian Museums and assumed that all museums were free - until we began to visit other cities where the costs were out of sight. Friends came from out-of-town and were always amazed that we lived in the Nations' Capital - yes, we took them sight-seeing and were proud of our city, but the total vitality of it did not sink in until we re-visited the life of Attorney Thurgood Marshall who led the team that won "Brown vs. Board of Education," a decision that expanded the schools to children of color, nationwide. Later, when Martin Luther King gave his now-famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial and the entire world seemed to come to hear and see that great March on Washington, we knew for sure that our generation had been afforded a very special place in the annals of history by living here.

Looking back on my time in Monroe Elementary School, I recall another student was brought to cross at the corner of Georgia Avenue and Irving Street by her grandmother; she from the west side of the street and I was from the east side - her name was Eleanor. Later we both walked down Georgia Avenue to Banneker Junior High School from which we both graduated. Eventually, we both attended and graduated from the Dunbar High School; her name is now more famous - she is Attorney Eleanor Holmes Norton and she has become our Representative in Congress for the City of Washington. I am most proud to say that I knew her then. As a part of this special generation in this wonderful unique city, we have been afforded many opportunities that would have escaped us in a lesser village or town.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

- QUIQUE AVILES
- WILLONA M. SLOAN
- GRACIELA SEDILLO LOPEZ

The Jury



Derek Gray has been a professional archivist for eight years. He is currently the Archivist in the Washingtoniana Division of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. The Division is a repository for local Washington, DC research and one of two units that comprises the Library's Special Collections Department. He manages the DC Community Archives, a 2,000+ linear foot collection of personal papers, business and organization records, photographs, oral histories, videos, and DVDs. A native of Uniondale, New York, Mr. Gray received his Bachelor of Arts in History from Virginia State University in 1998, and

earned a Master of Arts in History and Master of Library Science from the State University of New York at Albany in 2001.

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L. Peat O'Neil, a former *Washington Post* writer, is the author of *Travel Writing: See the World-Sell the Story* and other books. O'Neil's short fiction, travel journalism and reviews have appeared in numerous print and online publications. *Pyrénées Pilgrimage*, about her solo walk across France, was released in June, 2010 and is now available online through Amazon Books. An award winning writing instructor, Peat O'Neil has led writing workshops at several Washington, DC institutions, including Georgetown, Smithsonian Resident Associates, GWU, and the Graduate School. She has served as an in-classroom mentor to DC public

school English teachers. In 1997, she was early to make the transition to teaching online and has been an adjunct professor in UCLA's journalism program since then. Currently, she works in the Office of eDiplomacy at the U.S. Department of State as an advisor for Web 2.0 and new media programs.

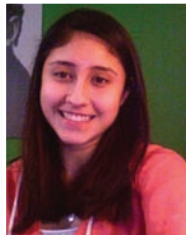
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The name and photo of Amalia Gomez-Rexrode amaliagomezrexrode@gmail.com was unwittingly omitted from the competition brochure.



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