

# Locals share stories of Sykesville's Black heritage



Robbinette Dorsey stands in downtown Sykesville, where an image of a family member is depicted on the banner honoring the town's Black heritage. Brian Krista/Staff photos

By Gabriella Fine

Robbinette Dorsey, 69, compares her upbringing in Sykesville to “The Wizard of Oz” film. “When the movie starts, it’s black and white, and then once Dorothy starts to dream, it becomes color.” Dorsey can vividly recall growing up in a segregated Sykesville.

Now, she is a part of a group working to preserve Sykesville’s Black history. “It’s coming alive. It’s in color,” she said.

She recalls a time when Black people were not allowed in the Sykesville downtown–area stores, except on Fridays. Her brother, Anthony Dorsey, was the first Black student to integrate Sykesville schools, she said. Robbinette Dorsey also said she was the only Black student in her class until fifth grade. “They wouldn’t drink after me at the water fountain,” she said.

Robbinette Dorsey’s great–grandmother was the daughter of an enslaved person. Her great–grandfather was born a freedman.

Her father, James E. Dorsey, worked as a night watchman at Henryton State, a hospital for Black people. He also drove a trash truck and a school bus. He worked multiple jobs to support their family, she said. Her mother, Agnes Costley Dorsey, was a domestic worker for white families, leaving Robbinette to take care of cooking and clearing in their home.

“Our Black history has been, literally, whitewashed,” she said.

Downtown Sykesville Connection — a nonprofit that promotes Sykesville’s Main Street and local economy — posted a short video of two people on cherry pickers mounting a banner during the past week. The sign reads: “Stories That Built Sykesville: A Tribute to Black Heritage” and lists the group’s website.

They hoped the post would reach people interested in helping fill gaps in the town’s recorded history.

In the comment section, former and current Sykesville residents lauded the town’s intentional efforts to preserve Black heritage. Some shared snippets of their family history.

Julie Della–Maria, executive director and chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer for Downtown Sykesville Connection, said others had reached out to the organization directly to share histories and provide forms of documentation and photographs.

Last year, the group began to gather material to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the United States and “work on a cohesive and collective story of Sykesville.”

Della–Maria said they realized they “were missing pieces, lots of pieces of the story.” Specifically, she said the group realized it was missing historical narratives pertaining to enslaved people in Sykesville, “who built the [economy] of Sykesville as we know it now, but unfortunately, from whom contributions were historically overlooked or omitted from public narrative.”

Collecting stories and materials is part of a larger effort to tell that story, she said. The JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion) committee of the Downtown Sykesville Connection is facilitating the project. Robbinette Dorsey is a committee member.

“The JEDI committee is probably the best thing that I’ve ever done,” Robbinette Dorsey said.

The group, which hosts events, including Juneteenth, Diwali and Sykesville Pride, is working in collaboration with The Gate House Museum to organize collected material of local Black history.

Museum curator Adrienne Smith said in an email that museum staff conducted research in late 2024 and throughout 2025 “to document the community of color along Oklahoma Road in Sykesville.”

Smith wrote that museum staff have helped guide the JEDI committee through the town’s “foundational history” to create a project that “reflects the connections of the current residents to their historical ties to this historically segregated neighborhood.”

“We have been talking to people, elderly adults in Sykesville that have shared with us amazing things, and we want to make sure that those stories don’t go with them” Della–Maria said.

She said community members are still invited to contribute to the Black heritage data collection either by sharing their own stories and information or by volunteering with the JEDI committee. Progress on an outline of Sykesville’s Black history be found on The Gate House Museum’s website: [thegatehousemuseum.com/black-history-sykesville](http://thegatehousemuseum.com/black-history-sykesville).

Robbinette Dorsey has found working on the project immensely gratifying, even though she isn’t able to connect interviews with Sykesville’s Black residents — “I will not conduct an interview because the people that we interview are all related to me,” she said.

“I feel like all I’ve ever wanted to do is make a difference, and I feel like I have the opportunity now to make a difference by educating, by reporting accuracy ... just shedding light on our heritage.”

*Have a news tip? Contact Gabriella Fine at [gfine@baltson.com](mailto:gfine@baltson.com) or at 443-900-1296.*