



Remembering Busing In South Boston With Michael Patrick MacDonald

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PHILLIP MARTIN



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This is Part Three of an ongoing year-long series on the impact of court ordered desegregation in Boston. Part One can be accessed [here](#). And [Part Two](#). This series is produced and reported in partnership with the [Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism](#) at Brandeis University.

In "All Souls," his best-selling autobiography, Michael Patrick MacDonald depicted the South Boston neighborhood he loved with graphic intensity. Forty years after court-ordered buses integrated Boston schools, MacDonald acknowledges that racism was a huge factor in Southie's resistance. But racism was just one facet of the kaleidoscope. The media, politicians, and the public failed to grasp the complexities of neighborhood life. I spent a day with MacDonald decoding the Southie of the 1970s where class, gangsters, and violence combined to define the anti-busing movement.

Busing was the best thing that ever happened to Whitey Bulger — by Michael Patrick MacDonald

Michael Patrick MacDonald was nine in September of '74 and living in the Old Colony Housing Project, where gang members and amateur boxers mixed with single moms and laid-off longshoremen. MacDonald wasn't from South Boston. His family, 10 kids and a single mom, arrived from Jamaica Plain — where they and other poor whites could no longer afford to live. But in South Boston they were outsiders.

"This neighborhood was very dangerous for anyone who was not from here, the west side, parts where the poorest people were." MacDonald said. "When we moved in we were suspect. We were outsiders. We had all our windows broken out in Old Colony. And so my mother sat up in a window with a shotgun aimed out the window all night long and nobody messed with us again. We were no longer outsiders."

For lots of other reasons too: The MacDonalds became a storied family on South Boston's west side with a reputation for protecting their own in a community torn by "a lot of local acts of violence here, and murders, more like Southie upon Southie people," MacDonald said.

But on September 12, 1974, when yellow buses rolled into the community, white kids used to fighting each other turned on new enemies: liberal politicians, tactical police squads and black school children.

One day in particular stood out for Michael Patrick MacDonald; a day he says, "that shaped my entire life; my entire perspective rooted around race and class."

"It was probably the worst thing I've ever experienced in my life and that's saying a lot because I've witnessed a lot of violence, including with a lot of family members who died young," he said.

It was October 6. A Haitian immigrant, 33-year-old Jean-Louis Andre Yvon, drove into South Boston to pick up his wife. Suddenly he found himself surrounded by dozens of screaming men, women and teenagers who pulled him from his car as he shouted, "I'm not black, I'm not black." But his attempt to differentiate from black Americans fell on deaf ears.

On a blustery and rain drenched afternoon, MacDonald shows me where this incident — that helped define South Boston to this day — took place:

"We're at the corner of Dorchester and Old Colony Ave in Southie," MacDonald said. "He ran to these steps over here and people continued to attack him. I was standing right over there. I have clear memory of which of my neighbors was in that crowd. They were some of the most hated neighbors in the neighborhood. So even among the poor, white population of Old Colony Housing Projects these people — the people whom were looked down on and made fun of — they were at the forefront because they had found someone lower than them: a black man."

The man was saved by a helmeted cop who fired his pistol in the air.

"After the incident, I found one of the baseball bats that was used that was thrown over there, and I remember taking it home to my mother, and her saying, 'Get rid of that goddam thing.'"

The MacDonalds, like most in this community, opposed busing. His older siblings initially boycotted classes at South Boston High and across town in Roxbury. MacDonald enrolled in a

Catholic School near the projects. On the streets, his older brother, Kevin, was throwing rocks at yellow school buses that hit their target. But 9-year-old Michael MacDonald had a bad throw.

"I was the uncoordinated one," he said. "As kids, just being part of a unison chant of 'Hell no, we won't go,' or 'Here we go Southie, here we go,' that — that's like a drug. And if you're from a real powerless place, that's a powerful drug."

Much of the anti-busing violence in South Boston was spontaneous, but a great deal was organized by a paramilitary group called the South Boston Marshals. Their ranks included gang members and associates of the Mullen Crew, a organized crime group that was winding down a war in '74 against rival gangster James "Whitey" Bulger.

"The South Boston Marshals were a threat to everyone who lived in South Boston," MacDonald said.

The Marshals saw themselves as guardians of the white community, led by a former Mullen-Gang-associate-turned-city-councilor, Jimmy Kelly.

"It was something that you knew in South Boston, that if you questioned any of the narrative coming from Jimmy Kelly or the South Boston Information Center, your life could be at risk," MacDonald said.

Kelly, wearing his trademark brown leather jacket when talking to reporters at the time, spoke derisively of blacks trying to take over Southie. In closed-door meetings — according to some who attended — he used the n-word almost exclusively in describing the enemy. And the enemy, in the view of the Marshals, was trying to make inroads all over town.

"This street here we're passing by in Dorchester — Center Street — this is where the first black family moved in, and they were firebombed," MacDonald said. "And a group of white families would stay out overnight with them to try to keep them safe, and what they were being called was outside agitators, and they were threatened with being firebombed and they were holding a meeting up at St. Mark's and were attacked by the South Boston Marshals."

Racial violence erupted everywhere in Boston in the fall of '74. In Southie, in Roxbury, on subway platforms, at Government Center, on the dance floors of disco clubs in Kenmore Square.

McDonald recalls a watershed moment in the first phase of busing 40 years ago in South Boston.

"This is the Rabbit Inn, that was made famous during the Boston busing riots," he said. "This is the place where the tactical police unit came into. They knew this was a place where the Mullen Gang and the South Boston Marshals hung out in there and they smashed and beat everybody in the place."

This was after a police officer was allegedly assaulted the night before in the Rabbit Inn.

"They went in there with covered badges and everything," he said. "I mean, the beatings. I witnessed a lot of police beatings. The police were the enemy, and the people here were the enemy of the police."

And MacDonald says that was great for South Boston's most notorious gangster, James "Whitey" Bulger.

"We didn't know that he was actually working with law enforcement, but a community that did not trust the police and did not like the police was the best thing that happened to Whitey Bulger," he said.

MacDonald says court-ordered busing created the perfect atmosphere for Bulger to exploit.

"The response to busing made the neighborhood close in on itself and completely shut down to the outside world," he said. "You know, Whitey didn't go around training people, you know, 'We're all going to keep our mouth shut.' It was busing that trained everybody to, number one, to be either with us or against us, and number two, to keep your mouth shut to the outside world."

MacDonald — whose own life was threatened after the release of "All Souls" — says anti-

busing resistance gave cover to Bulger and allowed his drug enterprise to thrive. At the start of busing, anti-busing leader Louise Day Hicks and her allies drafted a so-called "Declaration of Clarification," which began "It is against our children's best interest to send them to school in crime-infested Roxbury." And many here saw Bulger as a bulwark against an invasion of drug dealers into South Boston without knowing — or by ignoring — that he was himself the neighborhoods drug kingpin.

MacDonald, looking toward the courtyard of Old Colony where he used to live, says the lingering impact of Bulger's legacy during busing can be found in this partly reconstructed housing project.

"That building over there, that's where we grew up," he said. "Across the street my brother Frankie and my brother Davey lived together, and where Davey jumped off the roof to his death. And Frankie was a Golden-Glove boxer and people looked up to him. The gangsters loved him too, of course. Toward the end, like a lot of people around here, he was getting into the cocaine that that was flooding the streets."

Frankie died during an armored car heist in '84. In the rain, we drive down the streets of this demographically altered Southie, where housing projects are now more black and Latino than white; a community where time and gentrification have erased some of the worst memories of violence, but where heavy drug use still haunts many children of South Boston's anti-busing generation.

"These benches over here is where you'll see people kind of nodding out; people with track marks," MacDonald said. "Right through the tunnel there is an area that the kids always call the echoes and there's a spot there where you can echo your voice. And that's ironic today, when I see that this is exactly where I see the echoes of the past."

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