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ALI: You're listening to Community InterActions with InterAct Story Theatre. Our Wheaton community is full of stories to tell, and today, we're telling one of them. Today's Story: Who is Wheaton? (pause) Hi, I'm Ali Oliver-Krueger.

EMILY: And I'm Emily Townsend. I'm the artistic administrator for InterAct Story Theatre here in Wheaton, and Ali is our Executive and Artistic Director. Ali, how would you explain who we are at InterAct for the people in our community who might not know us yet?

ALI: Oh, sure! InterAct Story Theatre is a touring theatre for young audiences and an educational theatre company based right here in Wheaton. We believe that the arts are for everyone and everyone learns through the arts, and we bring that mission to life through creating original interactive performances, conducting education programs in schools and learning communities, and producing the Wheaton Family Theatre Series, a free performing arts series for kids and families right here in Wheaton.

EMILY: Here at InterAct, an important part of our mission is to be a part of our community here in Wheaton, and like a lot of organizations, the last year has shown us new ways to serve that community. We saw the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Wheaton and wanted to make sure that the stories of this community during this time were being shared, which brought us here!

ALI: With this limited podcast series, we're collecting some of those stories and sharing them through the words and voices of the people who are living them. These episodes will be taking a look at who we are in Wheaton, and focusing on some specific people in Wheaton who wanted to share their stories about the impact of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. We'll also look at the national context in which our local stories take place.

EMILY: So today, we need to lay a foundation. We need to start by answering some very basic, but very important questions. Who is Wheaton? What is Wheaton? And where *is* Wheaton? Ali, you grew up in Wheaton, so I know you can help us, where is Wheaton?

ALI: What a great question. The short answer is it depends on who you ask, and what map you use. That's because Wheaton itself is not an incorporated city or town, but it's rather an area inside of a larger unincorporated place called Silver Spring. So that makes the boundaries a little amorphous, although many locals have very strong ideas and sometimes conflicting ideas about what constitutes Wheaton. So for our purposes, most of the time that we're talking about Wheaton, we're talking about Wheaton in terms of the 20902 and 20906 zip codes. Most of the time.

EMILY: (laughs) Gotcha. So now that we've talked a little bit about where we are in Wheaton, I think it's helpful to know how Wheaton got here, to have a bigger historical picture on how Wheaton came to be what it is today.

ALI: Which means we have to go back to acknowledge that Wheaton is on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Piscataway people.

EMILY: The Piscataway lived throughout this entire region for centuries, until the arrival of English and other European colonizers, who forced them from their homes. Those colonizers took over the land and bought and sold it to themselves and their friends and family--there are records from 1689 of an English Colonel named William Joseph who purchased two pieces of land that include what we think of today as Wheaton. The Piscataway ancestral land became farmland for wealthy owners who leased it out to tenant farmers, a system that remained in place for many decades.

ALI: By the 1800s, the area we think of as the urban district in Wheaton were framed by three roads that were known loosely as "the Three Great Roads". The roads have had different names over the years, but they are known today as Georgia Avenue, University Boulevard, and Veirs Mill Road. Georgia Avenue was a north/south toll road that originally ran from DC to Brookeville, and eventually to Baltimore. Viers Mill Road was part of a longer road that went west through Rockville and towards the Potomac River. University Blvd connected Georgetown to what's now Prince George's County, going through Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Kensington, Wheaton, Silver Spring and finally Bladensburg. So by using one of these roads, you could get to most places in the national capital region, and they all took you through this one little triangle. By the early 1800s a small business district called Leesborough developed at the crossroads of these Three Great Roads. Later, this area in the triangle of those three roads came to be known as Mitchell's Crossing, named after Mitchell's Tavern, a popular tavern at the corner of what's now Georgia Avenue and University Boulevard. But for all the people who passed through Leesborough every day, few people actually lived there. In 1865, there were fewer than 200 people living in the Leesborough/Mitchell's Crossing area, and many of them were farmers, or local tradespeople.

EMILY: During the Civil War, Confederate forces marched through the area on their way to attack Washington, DC. They were routed by Union General Frank Wheaton's forces, and marched back through this area in defeat. One of the men who fought under General Wheaton, George Plyer, decided to honor him a few years later. When Plyer became postmaster of Leesborough in 1869, he changed the name of the post office (and with it, the official name of the community) from Leesborough to Wheaton. But, it took a little extra doing to make the name stick. A new post mistress in 1874, Henrietta E. Tetly, changed the post office name back to Leesborough, the original name, but the very next year, Plyer got the job back and switched the name *again* to Wheaton, and this time, it stuck.

ALI: (laughing) This is one of the things I love about collecting local history stories. Incredible. Around that time, something else happened that had a huge effect on the entire region and beyond - something called the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act in 1883. Politics always plays a part in shaping cities, and this close to Washington, it's inevitable that politics played a role in shaping Wheaton. In this act, the US made a big shift in how the entire civil service of the federal government was run. Originally, jobs were handed out based on the spoils system- after

you won an election, you could give jobs to your friends, donors, and supporters. This Act changed that- federal jobs needed to be merit-based, or at least some of them did in this initial push. Bit by bit, the number of jobs covered by this Act grew, which meant that more people could work in the government as a career regardless of who was in power. So that meant if you got a government job, you got to keep your government job, even if a new President came into office. And *that* meant that you could build a life in this area. So the suburbs around Maryland started to grow as federal workers moved in. Even so, Wheaton was just a little bit different. It kept that rural feel for a lot longer than the surrounding communities- it didn't have a commuter rail line, for example, and farmers hung on for much longer here. Some people came to Wheaton, or stayed in Wheaton, because they liked feeling a little bit out of the country this close to the District. Wheaton was known as the place to live if you wanted to feel like you lived out in the country, but needed to get on the road into the city easily. By 1930, that area was home to 13,377 people.

EMILY: That is a significant growth from 200.

ALI: Yes! For sure, but it's still slower than population growth in similar areas.

EMILY: Sooner or later, of course, the inevitable rise of the subdivisions came! In the 1950s, the post-war population boom came to Wheaton--by the 1950 census, Wheaton had grown to a population of 77,417 people, with the census showing the population had more than doubled since the 1940 census. With this population boom, combined with the need for federal workers, homes started being built at a breakneck pace- 10 homes per day were being built! The farms had to go, and the last little bit of undeveloped land that was left became Wheaton Regional Park in 1959. And of course, the mall came in- Wheaton Plaza became one of the biggest shopping centers in the country when it was opened in 1960.

ALI: Now, I'll tell you as somebody who grew up in Wheaton, that there are a lot of locals who still call that Wheaton Plaza, even though that's not the official name anymore. And I remember as a kid being able to go to Wheaton Plaza for all kinds of things. I think I even saw a show there once. They would sometimes have events and plays and things like that.

EMILY: Oh, that's cool!

ALI: Now, part of what makes Wheaton so tricky to pin down geographically is by this time, it was engulfed in the larger Silver Spring designation that had taken over so much of this area. Residents wanted to keep their own Wheaton identity, however, and they successfully petitioned the United States Postal Service in 1965 to be able to use the name Wheaton, MD for two zip codes: 20902 and 20906. Add in the metrorail extension reaching Wheaton in 1990, and a lot of what we now know as Wheaton had arrived. Of course, that's only a part of the story. The people who live in Wheaton are more important than the roads and the names! So Emily, who are the people of Wheaton?

EMILY: Well, the original inhabitants were the Piscataway, but after they were driven from their homes, the English colonizers who came in and took over the land were white, and the population stayed very rural and very white for a long, long time. As Wheaton became more suburban and less rural, it remained pretty homogenous throughout most of the twentieth century, but that began to change in the 1980s and the 1990s, as people began coming to Wheaton from around the world. By 1990, the immigrant population of Wheaton had grown to 22% and by 2019, it had increased to 43% of Wheaton residents. That's even higher than the rate across Montgomery County- the county as a whole has an immigrant population making up 32% of the total.

ALI: To put it in context, and nerd out on some demographic information for a moment- we're looking at the US census as our primary source. There are some interesting caveats when you use the census as your source over time. The census is shaped by not only who is in the area and responding to census questions, but the very questions that the census asks have changed multiple times over the years. That's especially true in the question of how to capture data about people of Hispanic or Latine origin. Another factor at play is that it can be challenging to get consistent data because what counts as Wheaton changes from census year to census year. Sometimes, Wheaton has been its own Census Designated Place. Sometimes it's been part of the Wheaton-Glenmont Census Designated Place, and sometimes parts of Kensington have been included with its numbers. For example, in that 1950 census we mentioned earlier, that year the census included Kensington and part of Takoma Park. Every year, where and how the census talks about the people of Wheaton changes.

EMILY: Exactly. So even by using one frame to look at Wheaton - the census - the edges of that frame shift around, and the lens it uses changes every time.

ALI: So with all that in mind, the first year for which we have racial demographic information about Wheaton, in whatever form Wheaton existed at that time, is 1930. In 1930, there were 13,377 people living in Wheaton. Back then, the census only gives some racial demographic information for this level - we know that 12,203 people were identified as white, 1,167 people as Black, and only 7 people as some other race. That means that over 91% of people living in Wheaton in 1930 were white. The population stayed predominantly white for years, until a shift started to take place, one that showed up in the 2000 census. That year, there were 41,911 people living in Wheaton, and 18,889 of them didn't identify as white- that's almost 50% of the residents of Wheaton. And that same year, 12,222 people identified themselves as being of Hispanic origin- that's almost 30% of Wheaton residents. So then, if we look at the most recent estimated population for Wheaton - that's for 2019 - there are 50,229 people living in Wheaton, and 60.97% of that population identifies as a race other than white, with 44% identifying as Hispanic. So when we talk about Wheaton, we're talking about an area that 20 or 30 years ago had a majority white populace, and is now an area with a majority Black and Brown population. And like many such communities, our local community has been hit very hard not only by Covid-19, but the socioeconomic effects of pandemic. In fact, the two zip codes we've mentioned, 20902 and 20906, are among the top five zip codes in the state of Maryland in terms of the number of Covid-19 cases.

EMILY: And that reflects a trend that's been documented across the country. As the pandemic raged and closures continued into the summer of 2020 and beyond, and cases grew and grew alongside the hospitalizations and the losses, the numbers grew alarming. Black and Brown people in America were being impacted more by Covid than white people. By the fall of 2020, the Washington Post had months' worth of Covid cases and deaths to analyze, and the numbers were clear in a November 20, 2020 report. Even after death rates began to fall across the country, Black, Asian, Native American, and Hispanic patients were still dying at higher rates than white patients. To quote directly from that article, "Black Americans were 37 percent more likely to die than Whites, after controlling for age, sex and mortality rates over time. Asians were 53 percent more likely to die; Native Americans and Alaskan Natives, 26 percent more likely to die; Hispanics, 16 percent more likely to die. Those higher case fatality rates for diagnosed people of color are on top of the increased infection rates for those unable to isolate at home because they are essential workers."

ALI: We all know as well, and all too well, that in a pandemic, there is a socioeconomic impact that goes alongside the number of positive cases and losses to families. When businesses have to close their doors, people lose their jobs. Unemployment rates skyrocketed across the country- in April 2020, 14.8% of Americans were unemployed. When you look at the numbers more closely, again, the disparity shows. Unemployment was at 16.7% for Black workers compared to 14.2% for White workers, and at 18.9% for Hispanic workers compared to 13.6% for non-Hispanic workers. That disparity has stayed over time. For a lot of Wheaton residents, all those factors combined into a perfect storm that made this pandemic particularly hard to weather. Luisa Montero-Diaz, Midcounty Services Director, puts it very cogently:

LUISA: "You know, the other thing that this pandemic uncovered, of course, was inequities. I mean, we talked a little bit about that in terms of the zip code, but also in terms of, you know, racial and ethnic and, you know, inequity, and health. And health disparities. And so we all knew that that was there, we all know that, it's been there, you know, there's been studies and research and we know that, and this pandemic just really uncovered that in a bold and, you know, kind of 'blow your mind away' kind of way, in that we saw these disparities really in stark relief."

EMILY: Here in Wheaton, there are so many people whose lives have changed in the last year due to the pandemic, and they all have stories. We'll be sharing some of those stories, and showing what those impacts mean in actual people's lives.

ALI: The Wheaton community has done so much to support each other this year and to find a way through to the other side together. We're so pleased to be able to share just a few of those stories with you. In our upcoming episode we'll share stories of the impact of pandemic on food and housing insecurity in Wheaton and in Montgomery County as a whole. Thanks for listening- we're glad you're here.

ALI: Community InterActions is produced by Emily Townsend and myself, Ali Oliver-Krueger. Theme music by Tom Teasley. Special thanks to Laura-Leigh Palmer for historical information about Wheaton, Luisa Montero-Diaz of the Mid-County Services Center, demographer/statistician Dr. Yeris Mayol-Garcia, and the census historians at the US Census Bureau. For more information about these stories and the people telling them, visit www.interactstory.com.

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