

# Bethlehem Moment: The Mayor of Main Street

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments May 6, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem Moments* 

Bethlehem Moment 22  
City Council  
May 5, 2020

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234 E. Goepf St.

**video (start at min. 2:20)**

**Bethlehem Moment: 1986**

## **An Unknown History about the Only African American Business in Historic Downtown Bethlehem**

For years I have been annoyed when individuals reference the history of African Americans and their presence in Bethlehem and maybe innocently leave out the only individual of African descent to own a successful business and property on Main Street in Historic Downtown Bethlehem. In this Bethlehem Moment, I want to talk about Steve Holloman, Sr., who was the owner of Topsy Turvy located at 528 Main Street. In fact, at one-point Steve was the proprietor of the gift shops at Hotel Bethlehem and the former Holiday Inn on 512.

When Steve shares his story, he recalls riding through Bethlehem on a business trip from Philadelphia. He was enamored by the beautiful historic majesty of the city and thought “this would be a good place to move and start a business.” Steve began looking for a property in downtown Bethlehem to purchase and encountered roadblocks. Steve persisted and connected with a realtor who worked with him to find the current



location he has now owned for the last thirty years. Steve recalls he met numerous setbacks by the City of Bethlehem and others who didn't want a Black man to own a property that included rental apartments in downtown Bethlehem nor open a business.

In 1986 Topsy Turvy was birthed and opened at 528 Main Street. Topsy Turvy was an eclectic gift shop that featured an array of gifts and artwork. You could find handcrafted jewelry, Moravian stars and leather game boards; vintage posters, Bethlehem tee shirts, hats, unique antiques and furniture, and so much more!

A signature event for Steve was Musikfest. Every year, he would have a booth in front of his store and sold his exclusive music-themed tee shirts. This was one of the most popular items that people sought to purchase. Each year, a new design was featured. In fact, to this day you can spot a tee shirt that someone is wearing and know it was purchased at Topsy Turvy.

Steve was known as the mayor of Main Street because of his outgoing personality and welcoming disposition. On a beautiful day, there would be Steve immersed in conversations and laughter while sitting on the bench with friends like Dr. John, Tony the Englishman, Adrian who owned Adrian's, and countless others who stopped by "to shoot the breeze" and listen to wonderful music that serenaded everyone as they entered Topsy Turvy or walked by. You might hear Frank Sinatra, Keb-Mo, Carol King, Sting, Al Jarreau, Baka Beyond, Jimmy Lawrence the late Bethlehem jazz singer and so many others.

In 2005, Steve had an epiphany to create the secret garden in the back of his building. He worked tirelessly to create a sacred space that exuded peace and love. The creation led to a beautiful garden and pond with a stage for entertainment. The secret garden became a popular venue on Friday evenings for one of the first drum circles in Bethlehem. This venue would also become a meditation spot for customers and people who worked downtown.



What made Steve successful was his “spirit.” No matter who you were, Steve made you feel special. There was the young man who stopped by faithfully every day who dealt with several ability issues, and Steve always took time to talk to him. And the poet whose poetry is in the Library of Congress with her walker in hand who would bring her poetry for Steve to read. And the countless college students who stopped by for a word of encouragement. Yes, Topsy Turvy was a special place!

Many of Steve’s customers were regulars from the Pocono’s, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Philadelphia, and, of course, Bethlehem. One of the keys to success is “kindness” in action. It was nothing for Steve to share his special “hot tea with spices” with our community police officers who patrolled Main Street or the customer who came in on a cold wintery day. The other special ingredient is the ambience of the space. Steve’s creative genius was seen through the creative design of his store and the vibrant colors he used to decorate with. His window displays and flowers he planted in front of his store drew attention to the passer-by. It became the photo-op spot for television news folks and couples wanting a beautiful background.

Steve won awards for the care and attention he gave to his property. In 2012, Steve retired his business because of health issues. Topsy Turvy was a dream come true for Steve. He worked hard and withstood with dignity the prejudice he experienced as a Black man. In a world where you are judged by the color of your skin, Steve Holloman defied all the stereotypes cast upon him as a business owner. It is with love and gratitude that I write this story about Steve and the beauty and love he brought to all those who connected with Topsy Turvy. Ashae’

*“Without a shared history, we are not a true community.”*