

Special Report: Gentrification In Black And White

Newcomers Steer Clear Of Public Schools

By Jamal E. Watson

Special to the NNPA from The Amsterdam News

NEW YORK (NNPA)-Leticia Martin has carefully watched how gentrification has changed almost every aspect of her Harlem neighborhood. In recent years, Whites have moved into traditional working-class Black neighborhoods all across the city. They've opened up businesses, integrated Black churches and purchased brownstones.

What they have not done with great force, experts say, is placed their children in the local neighborhood public schools, where they could learn alongside working-class and, in some cases, poor Black children. While city officials estimate that thousands of Whites have moved into Black neighborhoods in New York City over the past 10 years, only a few dozen have opted to place their children in the public schools that are based in their new neighborhoods. Citing poor test scores, inadequate teachers and crumbling buildings, many of these parents refuse to enroll their children in schools that in some instances are located just a

block or two from their homes.

"We really thought about it for a long time," says Joan Toobin, 38, a new Harlem resident and parent of 7-year-old twins. "But the schools here are horrible. Someone told me a story about a kid bringing a knife to school. It's just too much."

In actuality, it only took Toobin, a stay-at-home mother, and her lawyer husband, Jeffrey, a day to decide that the boys needed to be enrolled in a private Westchester day school.

"We support public education, but the schools in the city have so many problems," Toobin says, adding that small class sizes, nutritional lunches and great facilities were why she sent her kids to the private school almost 45 minutes away.

"We love Harlem and want the schools to be better, but we can't just socially experiment with our children. They need a good education."

That kind of talk irritates parents like Martin, who argue that many Whites want the real estate that is housed in Black neighborhoods, but do not necessarily want to spend the time to address such neighborhoods social problems

as drugs, racism and failing public schools.

"These people could really be allies and partners and make a bold statement by putting their kids in public schools right in this neighborhood," says Martin. "They choose not to because they have the means and the ability not to. We can't afford no ritzy schools for our children. It makes us resent them."

The burden, some say, of improving the public schools should not be put on newly arrived Whites to fix all of the problems that Blacks face. But Gary Orfield, a professor at Harvard University and an expert on urban education, says that if gentrifying Whites enrolled their children in Black schools, it would likely improve the schools and, as a result, improve relations between the races.

"Our research shows that integrated schools really help bring neighborhoods together, Orfield says. "There are huge advantages to going to integrated schools for everyone. It can really make a difference for the neighborhood."

Still, Orfield knows that class matters. And he knows that

those with economic opportunities have far more options to place their children in achieving schools than those who must send their children to failing schools. He says that convincing Black middle-class parents to send their children to public schools in minority neighborhoods has been particularly challenging.

New York is no anomaly. All across the country, thousands of public schools from the elementary level through high school remain segregated. This reality comes almost 50 years after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, "Brown v. Board of Education," which outlawed segregation in public schools. Historically, the task of integrating public schools has been met with fierce opposition. In Boston during the 1970s, angry White parents resisted the integration of their schools, hurling rocks at the school buses and engaging in other types of mob violence.

Gabriel Brenner, 38, remembers those scary times. The former investment banker who now rents an apartment in Fort Greene has been thinking about ways to improve the

educational divide. He knows very little about starting a private or charter school, but it's something he's been thinking about a lot lately.

"This community is beautiful," he says. "There are many Whites like myself who have come in and have purchased homes and have helped to make this community beautiful. That's great, but we have not taken the time to bother at all with the schools and the poor education that many of our Black neighbors receive. We could really help to make these schools better."

Brenner doesn't know much about education, but after making a lot of money crunching numbers, he wonders if he might be able to make an impact on the children in his neighborhood.

"I mean, how do you end the cycle of poverty?" he asks. "I've always been told that if you want to achieve the American dream, you have to have a good education."

Brenner isn't alone. In other parts of New York City, especially in Harlem, there are a handful of White activists and middle-class Blacks based in Black neighborhoods who are

planning private or public schools aimed at improving education in many of these communities. Orfield says the success of these schools will depend on whether the faculty is integrated and well trained.

"Studies show that Black parents care more about the quality of the teacher than the race of the teacher," says Orfield, adding that if committed Whites want to teach Black children, they should do so, but have to be mindful of forming relationships with the larger Black community.

Martin doesn't necessarily have a problem with Whites like Brenner setting up new schools. But she wonders about the public schools that are struggling to stay afloat.

"I don't know if we need new schools," she says. "If Whites and upper-middle-class Blacks find our neighborhoods good enough to live in, they should also make sure that our schools are good enough for every child, including their own."

DNA-Testing Deadline Fast Approaching For Florida Inmates

By K. Chandler

Special to the NNPA from the Westside Gazette

FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. (NNPA)-Florida, which holds the dubious distinction of housing the nation's third-largest prison population behind Texas and California with 75,210 prisoners statewide-including 368 who are facing the death penalty-may soon become known as the state that denied thousands of inmates the right to pursue their innocence through DNA testing, despite some 131 criminal exonerations so far nationally.

Across the country hundreds of lawyers, paralegals, law professors and their students, along criminal justice advocates are rushing to beat an Oct. 1 deadline for submitting DNA claims, which will hopefully clear thousands of prisoners. Rudolph Holton, who served 16 years on Florida's death row for a conviction that was later determined to be without merit, is just the latest example.

Released in January, he became the 25th person to be exonerated in a state, which leads the country in the sheer number of prisoners who have been exonerated. Another 10 or more inmates, who are believed by many legal experts to have a good chance of being found innocent through DNA evidence, continue to languish on death row.

The law allowing inmates to seek relief through DNA testing was sponsored by state Sen. Alex Villalobos (R-Miami) and went into effect in 2001. The impetus for it stemmed from the death of Frank Lee Smith, a convicted murderer and rapist from Broward County. Tragically, a year after his death, DNA evidence, which had only recently been introduced as a viable tool in clearing criminals of wrongdoing, proved that Smith was innocent of the brutal 1985 murder and rape of an 8-year-old Broward girl. But by then it was too late, as he had died a painful death from cancer while awaiting execution on death row.

Similarly, Jerry Frank Townsend, another Broward County resident serving a 22-year sentence for the capital

offenses of rape and murder, was also exonerated after DNA evidence determined that he could not have been the perpetrator.

Under the new law, anyone who is criminally convicted has two years following sentencing to request that a judge review DNA evidence that might clear his or her name. This covers anyone who was convicted prior to when the law went into effect as long as they meet the Oct. 1 deadline. Excluded are those individuals who pled guilty.

According to Jenny Greenberg, who works with the Innocence Project out of Florida State University in Tallahassee, there are about 82 cases that they are currently fast tracking in order to submit them for DNA examination before the rapidly approaching October deadline. That is 82 out of a total of 400 cases that were originally submitted by inmates. Of these 82 cases, only 20 are completed and ready for DNA testing, she said.

Many other pro-bono lawyers are facing the same dilemma and complain that they are being stretched to the limit by a deadline that appears to be both capricious and arbitrary. They assert that there should never be any limitations or restrictions placed on justice, and maintain that in order to prepare their cases properly, it is only fair that the Oct. 1 deadline be extended.

According to attorney Barry Scheck, co-founder of The Innocence Project at Cardozo Law School in New York, there is enormous difficulty in tracking down legitimate cases. Some of the obstacles hindering the process, he pointed out, include locating the attorneys who originally represented the case, along with court transcripts that have long since been filed away, and DNA samples that may or may not exist any longer.

Gov. Jeb Bush disagrees with extending the Oct. 1 deadline and according to his press secretary, Alia Faraf, he is fully "satisfied that Florida has adequate safeguards in place to ensure that no person is wrongfully executed."

Faraf also noted that the governor had given his assurances that he would never

sign a death warrant "until relevant DNA evidence that could exonerate the inmate has been considered."

"The fact is, in most of the cases around the nation, there wouldn't have been exoneration if there was a deadline," said Raag Singhal, former president of the Broward Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. "I

don't understand what the governor's office is afraid of. The legislators wanted closure on these cases, so they created this window, but the window doesn't come with the appointment of competent counsel. Inmates have to find pro-bono lawyers to represent them. There's too much work for that type of window or deadline."

Villalobos, who was approached by Barry Scheck during this last legislative period regarding an emergency amendment for an extension, stated, "I'm in favor of extending the time period if there is a solid reason... We won't let the testing go on indefinitely, there has to be some end to it. But you can't push for DNA testing to prove

someone's guilty without using that same evidence to prove someone's innocence. You can't talk out of both sides of your mouth."

Partial sources: Palm Beach Post, Sun Sentinel & the Miami Herald.

KYIZ AM 1620

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Community Health Fair 2003

Free Seminars

10:00 - 10:45

Kristen Wurz, Heart & Stroke Association
"Stroke Prevention"

11:00 - 11:45

Jennifer Newell, RN, MHA, CDE
Joslin Diabetes Center/Swedish Medical Center
"Diabetic Educator"

1:00 - 1:45

Rob Luck, LICSW
Providence Transition Program
"Hospice 5 wishes"

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