

Not all neighborhoods were created equal in Palo Alto

A look at how real estate policies undermined Black homeownership

Jerry Harrison, an African American man, arrived in Palo Alto from North Carolina in 1922 in search of a better life, according to his grandson Michael Harrison.

He found work as a railroad porter as well as shining shoes at the Hotel President on University Avenue. His wife, Ruth Odessa, cleaned houses and washed clothes, said Michael Harrison, who grew up in Palo Alto and still lives here at age 69.

“They were very frugal,” he recalled. “My grandmother used to serve us milk with water added to it.”

The Harrisons saved enough to buy a small house in Palo Alto’s Crescent Park neighborhood, but because it was illegal to sell to Black residents, Jerry Harrison asked a Jewish friend to buy the property “and they transferred it into my grandfather’s name,” Michael Harrison said. “That’s how he was able to buy the property.”

The Harrison family’s story wasn’t uncommon. Housing restrictions existed in neighborhoods throughout Palo Alto. When the Southgate neighborhood was subdivided in 1923, for example, all properties carried deed restrictions specifying that no persons of African, Japanese, Chinese or Mongolian descent were to use or occupy the houses, according to “Palo Alto: A Centennial History,” published in 1993 by Ward Winslow and the Palo Alto Historical Association.

These types of restrictions existed in Palo Alto neighborhoods for decades until the U.S. Supreme Court voided racial restrictions in

1948. Despite the high court’s ruling, many restrictions lingered in deeds and bylaws.

There were groups in Palo Alto that condemned such practices, such as the Palo Alto Fair Play Committee, which in the 1950s began pushing for open housing. Members lobbied the government to adopt new laws and created an interracial housing development near the intersection of Greer Road and Colorado Avenue with Black, Asian and white residents. The development became a quiet success, Winslow wrote. But a local survey around that time indicated that most still said they “would rent to Caucasians only.”

And then there was Joseph Eichler, who became the first local developer to refuse to abide by the exclusionary standards and insisted that his homes were to be sold to anyone and everyone who had the money, according to Matt Bowling’s PaloAltoHistory.org.

In 1958, when the trade group Associated Home Builders Inc. refused to support his position of selling to everyone, Eichler resigned from the group. By the time Eichler died in 1974, he had built roughly 11,000 homes in California, including 2,700 in Palo Alto. His subdivisions opened the door for Black and Asian buyers in Palo Alto.

In the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, the nonprofit Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing also worked to promote equal opportunity by investigating local complaints of housing discrimination and providing legal education to tenants and landlords.

But those who lived in Palo Alto

during that time said that discrimination persisted.

Longtime Palo Alto resident LaDoris Cordell said that while house hunting in the late 1980s with her partner — a white woman — she encountered so many irritating stereotypes that she took to waiting in the car instead of entering open houses.

“We went into this one open house in Palo Alto and a white female Realtor said to me, ‘This house is for sale, not for rent,’” Cordell recalled. “At this time, I was a judge. When I told her I already owned a house in Palo Alto she said, ‘Oh, you’ve come a long way.’”

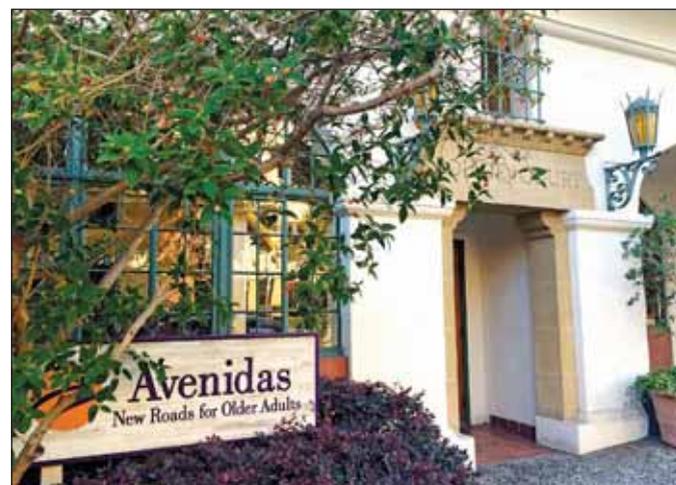
“I was stunned,” Cordell said. “Then she followed me all through the open house. The next week I wrote a letter to the head of her company and said I was so insulted.”

The response, Cordell said, was “‘She’s one of our best Realtors. We can’t believe she did that — we’re so sorry.’ I decided I couldn’t do it anymore — I stopped going to open houses. But we did find a house.”

Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing no longer exists, but the problem of housing discrimination has not disappeared, said Harrison, who lives in a house close to the one his grandparents purchased.

“(Housing discrimination) is going to be an issue as long as there are Black and white people in Palo Alto, and everywhere in the country,” he said. “I’m happy things are changing some, but it’s a long way from where it should be.” ■

—Chris Kenrick



Avenidas announced on June 24 that it is cutting back on several programs at its enrichment centers as it pivots to a contactless service model.

Avenidas cuts programs as it pivots to virtual era

Nonprofit switches to new service model for classes, transportation services

by Linda Taaffe

Avenidas announced on June 24 that it is halting and scaling back several programs offered through its two enrichment centers in Palo Alto and its adult day health care center in Mountain View as the organization pivots to a new virtual and contactless service model.

The senior services nonprofit will no longer provide seniors assistance with minor home repairs through its Handyman Services program and has scaled back its door-to-door transportation service. The Redwood Cafe at its newly renovated center on Bryant Street in downtown Palo Alto and the Avenidas Blooms volunteer group that distributes floral arrangements to the sick and elderly also are among the programs that have been cut. Senior day care programs at Avenidas Rose Kleiner Center in Mountain View and the Senior Planet@Avenidas tech center in Palo Alto will scale back operations, according to the June press release.

The organization also announced that it is laying off seven of its 53 employees.

“Due to COVID-19, our operations drastically changed, and this new reality is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, causing us to take on these belt-tightening changes,” Avenidas CEO and President Amy Andonian stated in the press release.

“Although our buildings have been and will remain closed for an unknown amount of time, we are delivering as many existing and new services and programs as we possibly can ... to meet the new needs of our vulnerable senior population,” she added.

Andonian said Avenidas staff members will continue

to work remotely Monday through Friday to help seniors, their families and caregivers as everyone navigates the health crisis.

Since the shutdown, the organization has pivoted from providing on-site and in-person services to delivering groceries, supplies and medicine to those in need, fielding a hotline and calling seniors to check in with them as needed. The group also has transitioned many on-site classes to Zoom and has launched virtual support groups.

At the Rose Kleiner site in Mountain View, Director Kristina Lugo said staff is managing participants’ health through phone calls and physically distanced visits.

“Even in the face of these challenging times, we can see this as an opportunity to innovate in new ways to reach an even bigger and more diverse senior population with our ‘Avenidas Without Walls’ strategic initiative,” Andonian said.

Founded in 1969, Avenidas has operated classes, enrichment programs and outreach services for local seniors in the community for more than five decades. The organization completed a major renovation of its Bryant Street location in April 2019 that doubled its downtown space and led to the opening of a second campus at Cubberley Community Center, which initially opened as its headquarters for 18 months during the construction, but continued to offer programs long term.

For more information about Avenidas, visit avenidas.org. ■

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Racism

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kids, were treated, mostly at the high schools. Black kids were getting suspended or disciplined at disproportionate rates given how small their population was. I’d get calls — sometimes from parents, sometimes from teachers — who saw this and were concerned. It was all part of the systemic racism issue.”

In 1982 Cordell was appointed to the Santa Clara County Municipal Court by then-Gov. Jerry Brown. Six years later, she won the election for Superior Court, where she served until leaving to become vice provost at Stanford in 2001.

When people began discussing racial profiling in the 1980s or 1990s, “there was all this push-back,” she said. “Now we know it happens. It’s harder if you’re Black and you live in a city that counts itself as being liberal, mostly white, where people don’t get it, or are in denial or don’t understand.”

Cordell said she “should be jaded by now” but remains “ever hopeful,”

particularly encouraged by the youthful organizers of the current protests. She also has recently found joy in a surprising racially integrated venue in Palo Alto — the pickleball courts at Mitchell Park.

Boyd said she feels uplifted by the Black Lives Matter signs she notices in the yards of some of her neighbors while out for her afternoon walks.

“It’s really consoling and comforting to me to know that our neighbors are finally aware about police brutality in this country,” she said. “When people put a sign in their yard, we feel like they have empathy for the Black people in America.”

Loretta Green credited people with cell phones for photographing and documenting racist incidents that, in previous times, would not have been believed.

“Thank goodness for cell phones,” she said. “I’m hoping that will make a difference, because all of this has been going on for a long time,” she said. ■

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After a white resident called the police on a Black neighbor out for a stroll, longtime Palo Alto residents Loretta and Bill Green launched a series of conversations to help people understand that a Black person in the community is not a cause for concern. “If you see some behavior that’s criminal, you can do something, but the mere presence of a Black person is not criminal,” Bill Green said.