Not all neighborhoods were created equal in Palo Alto
A look at how real estate policies undermines 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 worked as a railroad porter as well as shining shoes at the Hotel President on University Avenue. His wife, Ruth Odessa, cleaned 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 recalled.

“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.

“Their attitudes are going to be an issue as long as there are Black and white people in Palo Alto, and everywhere in the country”, she said. ‘I’m happy things are changing some, but it’s a long way from where it should be.’

— Chris Kenrick

Racism (continued from page 21)

kids, were treated, mostly at the high schools. Black kids were get- ting 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, I was just a catalyst to get people thinking about it.

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 she stepped down, Cordell was “amazed” by the housing racial profiling in the 1980s or 1990s, “there was all this push- back,” she said. “Now we know it happened. We found it out 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 integrat- ed venue in Palo Alto — the pickleball courts at Mitchell Park.

Boy said she feels uplifted by the joy in a surprising racially integrat- ed venue in Palo Alto — the pickleball courts at Mitchell Park. She notices in the yards of some of her neighbors while out for her after- noon walks.

“It’s really calming and comfort- ing to me to know that our neighbor- hobs are finally aware about police brutality in this country,” she said. “When people put a sign in their yards expressing 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 hope that this 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 resident La- Doris 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.’

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