WMAN Has Helped Unify Diverse Area For 40 Years Forum Celebrates Progress In W. Mount Airy

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POSTED: March 25, 1999

West Mount Airy has remained a stable, racially integrated community for 40 years - by choice rather than circumstance.

In this shady, middle-class community, white families routinely buy homes on nearly all-black blocks, or vice versa, without comment or incident.

That is something of a miracle in a country where the vast majority of minorities live in hyper-segregated communities and cut off from mainstream American society.

"Despite 50 years of civil-rights activism, legislation and litigation, residential segregation by race remains a deep-rooted problem in American life," said Thomas F. Sugrue, associate professor of history and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia is no exception. In 1990, nearly 72 percent of the city's black population lived in predominantly black neighborhoods, compared with 67 percent in 1980, making it the fourth most segregated city in America.

The same census found that West Mount Airy, a community of 14,000 people, remains 52.6 percent white and 39.5 percent African-American. From 1980 to 1990, the number of white residents actually increased from 51.7 percent, indicating the community is not resegregating like so many other Philadelphia neighborhoods.

West Mount Airy's past, present and future will be discussed at a forum celebrating the West Mount Airy Neighborhood Association's 40th anniversary today, from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the Germantown Jewish Center at Lincoln Drive and Ellet Street.

"This will be a chance to look back over a period of success and remind people that it took hard work, and it will take hard work in the future," said Sugrue.

WMAN was formed in 1951, when African-Americans began moving into what was then an all-white middle-class enclave. The community faced massive white flight and institutional disinvestment.

But instead of yielding to the block-busting tactics of unscrupulous real-estate agents and bailing out, many white residents chose to stay put and accept the new black residents.

Not everyone happily joined hands to sing "Kumbaya." Some early black residents recall having to use white "straw buyers" to conceal their racial identity. Others moved into their new homes in the dead of
night for fear of protests from white neighbors. The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations banned real-estate solicitations in the area for much of the 1970s in an effort to halt panic selling.

There was some softening in market demand from white homebuyers in the early years. And at one point the balance between white and non-white residents hit the 50-50 mark. That is often the tipping point for an all-out exodus of the remaining whites and a complete racial turnover, but once again West Mount Airy bucked the trend, regaining white residents even as the city overall lost increasing numbers of white residents to the suburbs.

The neighborhood survived those early challenges, thanks largely to its strong, well-educated middle-class core and their decision to choose integration over flight, said Barbara Ferman, a Temple University professor who co-authored a study on integration in West Mount Airy.

Communities that are "diverse by direction" fare better economically and socially than those that are "diverse by circumstance," Ferman said.

It also helped that the first African-Americans to move into the neighborhood were also well-educated and middle-class. Even today, residents are mostly lawyers, teachers, doctors, executives, judges and civil servants.

Bob and Bernice Evans were typical of the black families who moved to West Mount Airy in the 1960s. Both were teachers. Resisting the trend to the suburbs, they moved to Ellet Street from an all-black neighborhood in Yeadon after some of their children left for college and the youngest was a senior in high school, Evans said.

The year was 1964, and thanks to WMAN's efforts, the Evances say they can't recall any negative reaction to their arrival. "I liked the closeness of the neighborhood," Bernice Evans recalled. "It was very intimate, and everyone was friendly."

The Evances paid $36,000 for their four-bedroom twin. It's worth more than four times that amount today. Although their block of Ellet has more African-American homeowners than in the past, the Evances say there are still several white families on the block - two of them relative newcomers.

That still takes Bob Evans aback - and pleases him, too. "Most whites stay away from black people," said the World War II veteran. "It's different here."

Elsewhere in America, agents may advise middle-class black home-sellers to remove all racial identifiers before prospective white buyers come through, but not here, said Pat Henning, a real-estate agent and WMAN board member.

"We have any number of people who have moved here recently from the suburbs," said Henning, although she admits they're usually empty-nesters or singles who don't have to worry about kids and schools.
Many of the whites chose West Mount Airy because of its racial makeup. Like Sugrue, they have the resources to live pretty much anywhere they choose.

Said Sugrue: "I chose consciously to live in Mount Airy because I like the diversity there, and I want my kids to grow up experiencing diversity rather than living in ghettos of privilege and exclusion."

Most African-Americans, on the other hand, move to West Mount Airy for the housing stock and the upward mobility the neighborhood typifies, researchers said.

Race is no longer the big issue in West Mount Airy, said WMAN president Laurie Tarver. Initially organized around civil-rights issues, WMAN has shifted its focus to "more pressing issues [like] schools, crime and safety," she said.

That's not a bad thing, said Ferman. "There is something to be said for not addressing the issue of race, because if you keep looking at the race issue, you will never get past it," Ferman said.

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