

## **Diverse and Divided Minorities Find Suburbs Offer No Escape From Bias**

**By Elizabeth Llorente  
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*Part Two of Diverse and Divided  
Part 1 available in The Authentic Voice*

The high crime rate, troubled schools, and cramped conditions of urban life were behind them.

Now, with a move from Paterson just a few miles away, the Bryant family was in a comfortable corner-lot home in Ridgewood, with its manicured lawns, towering oak trees, and swank downtown.

It seemed a picture-perfect life -- until the Bryants' daughter, Cassandra, came home from her first week of school in tears. The only black girl in her first-grade class, Cassandra told her mother that none of the children would hold her hand when they stood in a circle. A girl standing beside her in class recoiled and blurted: "Your color might rub off on me."



**Elsa Mantilla, left, shares a laugh with customer Ana Rodriguez in her shop on 21st Avenue in Paterson, N.J. Both women are from the Dominican Republic. (Photo credit: Danielle P. Richards/ The Record.)**

The incident was the first taste of a bittersweet life in a predominantly white town.

Like many minorities, the Bryants found that crossing from racial and ethnic enclaves to mostly white towns, and from working-class neighborhoods to more affluent ones, bestows rewards and rejection.

Cities, of course, grapple with their own racial and ethnic divisions. In the first part of "Diverse and Divided," on Jan. 25, The Record chronicled the tensions that have evolved in Paterson as blacks feel increasingly displaced by Hispanics, who have become the city's majority.

But at a time when suburbs are seeing their greatest diversity ever, many who left Paterson find that the American dream, especially when pursued outside urban areas, brings its nightmares. Professional and financial success, they learn, often do not bring acceptance.

Blacks seem to experience more discrimination than other minorities in largely white areas. Many settle in black sections of predominantly white suburbs.

Hispanics, too, have their brushes with discrimination. But for Hispanics, an ethnic group that may be of any race, the degree of acceptance seems tied to the darkness of their skin, and level of assimilation. When considering which neighborhood to live in, Hispanics, like Asian-Americans, express far less interest than blacks in living near other members of their minority group.



City Councilwoman Vera Ames-Garnes of the 4th Ward sits on her stoop which she calls "my office." (Photo: Danielle P. Richards/The Record)

In many ways, discrimination today is difficult to prove and address, minorities say -- particularly in more upscale suburbs.

"There are people in Ridgewood who don't want to believe we're here," says the Rev. Thomas Johnson, pastor of the Mount Bethel Baptist Church, one of two black places of worship in the village, which has a community of about 400 blacks. "They don't see us, or they don't want to see us."

A black mother in Westwood says she saw bigotry in the white mother who always moved her daughter away from her and her child during a weekly recreational activity. A dark-skinned Hispanic man saw it in the Clifton neighbors who would not return his hellos. A white Costa Rican immigrant from Wyckoff saw it in the non-Hispanic white co-workers who, presumably in benign jest, sometimes called him "the Mexican."

"Today it's more subtle," Johnson says. "Racism today is in the heart."

### **Village battles hatred**

In 1990, bigotry did not confine itself to the heart. In Ridgewood, it announced itself loudly. In the span of two weeks that year, a black family found excrement and a racist note on their porch. Two weeks later, a parking meter patrol officer discovered swastikas painted near the Ridgewood railroad station. Many whites rallied around the black family. The community engaged in soul-searching. The mayor urged the public not to judge Ridgewood by the acts of hatred, but by its response to them.

One response was the establishment of the Community Relations Advisory Board of Ridgewood and Glen Rock, made up of 25 residents from both towns.

Its mission is to promote inclusiveness by bringing diverse groups together, addressing complaints about bias, and raising awareness about race relations issues.

"We [Americans] are a racist culture," says board Chairwoman Alice Newton, who is white and lives in Ridgewood. "Many people of goodwill don't recognize the things that people of color experience but that they don't have to deal with because they're white."

Though suburbs are growing more diverse, Newton says, many of the people who live in them continue to lead homogeneous lives.

"Many people are happy about living in a diverse community, but as a former member of this board said, we aren't really making headway in bringing people together until we're all sitting down and having dinner as neighbors," Newton says. "Ridgewood and Glen Rock are having these discussions, which is a lot more than other towns are doing."

At a meeting last week, a black member of the board recalled being one of only six minorities - all blacks - at Ridgewood High School decades ago.

Today, Ridgewood is still predominantly white, but minorities are 15 percent of the population of 25,000. Asian-Americans form the largest contingent, with 2,162. Blacks number 400. Hispanics total nearly 950 and account for more than half of residents who moved into the village between 1990 and 2000, the latest census shows.

Indeed, Hispanics, now the nation's largest minority group, have been moving into the suburbs at an increasing rate. Many are new immigrants from Latin America who are bypassing cities and settling in the towns in which they work.

### **A changed economy**

"The economy has suburbanized," says James Hughes, the dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

And a diverse population, which has tended to settle wherever the bulk of unskilled jobs are, has followed.

On the other end of the economic spectrum, many children of immigrants are enjoying more prosperity than their parents, and seeking a higher quality of life. Bergen, one of the most affluent in New Jersey, reflects the trend. Hispanics and Asian-Americans, for instance, are the largest minority groups in Bergen County, with each rising from 6 percent of the population in 1990 to 10 percent in 2000, according to the Census Bureau. In the same period, African-Americans, the longest established minority group in the county, inched from 4.8 percent to 5.3 percent of the county population.

The level of acceptance Hispanics experience is more varied than that of blacks. The darker their skin, the more discrimination Hispanics encounter. It is a variation on racism that race experts call "shade-ism."

Rafael Cuellar, a fair-skinned Cuban-American who moved to the United States with his family when he was an infant, grew up in Paterson. He married a Mexican-American woman, and runs a supermarket in Passaic. A few years ago, he moved to Westwood, and then to Clifton. He says he met with acceptance in his mostly white neighborhoods in both communities.

"I look more Italian than anything, and I don't have an accent," says Cuellar, 34. "I blend in. Most Hispanics I know make a seamless transition out of the urban areas into the suburbs."

Blacks say whites in their towns seem more accepting of other minorities, such as Hispanics and Asians, than of them.

Many blacks are reluctant to move into white areas, and remain in cities - or their outskirts - and circumvent the poor-quality schools by sending their children to private academies.

Those who do settle in the suburbs more often than not choose established black sections, which give them a sense of belonging. Many of these black neighborhoods date back to the first half of the last century, and in some cases, even earlier.

Some affluent suburban areas, including Englewood, Ridgewood, Westwood, and Glen Rock, had black communities nearby. Those communities consisted of "worker housing," for the black-servant class that toiled in the homes of whites, Hughes says.

"That led to the historic concentration of blacks in several sections of the suburbs," he says.

Jessica Thomas, a black teenager who moved with her family from Paterson to a black neighborhood in Westwood nearly four years ago, says that at Westwood High School, "Asians either hung out in their own group or they mingled with white students. I think it's also a class issue. Asians are better off economically. Blacks and Hispanics in Westwood are more working-class. But it's easier for Hispanics to be accepted, much easier than for blacks."

Eric Vasquez, who has dark hair and white skin, also experiences blending in -- walking into any store, or through Bergen County towns, and feeling like just another suburban resident.

But Vasquez, who came from Costa Rica in 1994 and now lives in Wyckoff, learned that white skin does not always insulate Hispanics from rejection.

While working as a busboy in restaurants in Bergen County suburbs, Vasquez endured taunting by some white co-workers and a slur-laced tirade by a customer who grew angry over an error he made.

"I tried reaching out to the people I worked with, but I felt a wall go up," Vasquez says. "Some of them would laugh and joke, and say 'Look at that Mexican.' They acted like they were just teasing me, but it was offensive."

And yet, Vasquez notes: "For every person who's insensitive or ignorant, there are many more people who are good and open-minded."

### **Differing perceptions**

To be sure, feeling accepted in school can be hard enough for young people of any race or ethnicity, but minorities in the suburbs say they feel an extra burden.

In Ridgewood, Cassandra Bryant continued to grapple with a sense of alienation as she coursed through the school system. She felt like an outsider, especially in high school, when she found herself in the midst of students driving cars that cost more than her family's entire life savings.

In Ridgewood, where the median household income listed in the 2000 Census was \$104,000, Bryant felt embarrassed by her family's modest lifestyle. So she lied about them. She told white students that her father was a coach for the Jets, and that she had a part in Radio City's "Christmas Spectacular."

School district officials in Ridgewood say they try to encourage minority students and their parents to bring forward concerns about fitting in and bias incidents.

"It's hard for us to see it," says Russell Titus, the assistant schools superintendent. "It's not something that jumps out. We don't know about it unless someone points it out to us."

Some parents seem reluctant to raise concerns about alienation or bias, he says. "It could be pride, or a feeling that we wouldn't understand," he says.

Kristina Pileggi, a white River Edge resident who has become a close friend of Jessica Thomas of Westwood, says many whites have doubts that racism exists to the extent that many minorities describe.

"They just don't really believe it still exists," says Pileggi, who attends Bergen Community College with Thomas.

But even Pileggi, who says she has long been interested in the subject of race and whose closest friends are blacks, finds that she and Thomas many times perceive the same things through very different lenses.

Sitting in a remote corner of the college library one morning, Thomas and Pileggi speak about how they often visit a River Edge diner when they're done with classes.

"I feel uncomfortable sometimes when I walk in there," Thomas, 18, says. "Everyone is white. I'm the only black person. I feel, when I walk in, that people are looking at me."

Pileggi gazes at her friend. A puzzled look sweeps across her face. "Really? You think so?" she asks Thomas, with a tinge of doubt. "I don't see it. I don't see people look at you when we walk in."

### **Conquering alienation**

The day Cassandra came home in tears after her first week at school in Ridgewood, her mother decided the family had to return to Paterson. Having grown up in Camden, she'd always felt most comfortable in diverse urban neighborhoods, despite all their problems.

Her husband, Arthur, had grown up in Paterson, but attended a mostly white school. Cassandra's trying moments brought back memories of when he felt alienated in white classes, and sometimes came to blows with students who insulted him.

But he had other memories, too.

He had found ways to form bonds with white students. Sports, he found, was a powerful icebreaker. Eventually, white classmates were among his best friends.

And so when his wife and daughter were ready to give up and leave Ridgewood, he would not have it. "I thought my daughter had to learn to deal with it," he says. "She had to learn to endure and persevere. I wanted her to understand that this is part of life. Coming into contact with whites, and having negative experiences, was going to come to her again someday. I went through it, and I knew she had to go through it."

Today, Sandra Bryant agrees. She confronted school administrators when she thought they were treating her daughter unfairly. She demanded respect when someone tried to demean her.

And, like her daughter, she has participated in group discussions about race relations in Ridgewood. She discovered that few whites were aware of how she often had to contend with race issues, and how shocked they were that she could still feel the pain of being called racist names a long time ago.

Johnson, the pastor, makes a point of participating in many activities and organizations in Glen Rock and Ridgewood. He encourages his congregants to do the same.

"I tell them they should make efforts to be part of the larger community," he says.

### **The decision to stay**

Some minorities decide that the toll of living in the suburbs is too high.

Marcia Julian lived in Hudson County cities most of her life, and spent nearly all her time in Paterson, where she worked and had close friends. The city neighborhoods were filled with bodegas where people dropped in for a café con leche, Spanish-language tabloids, and a little chisme, or gossip. If you just arrived cash-strapped from, say, El Salvador and needed a car, a fellow Salvadoran car dealer might let you take a car on interest-free credit.

But finding parking was exasperating. The streets were noisy, even at night. City services were deficient and the schools were a mess.

She found an adorable home on a leafy street in Oakland. She lasted six years.

"The people were not very friendly," says Julian.

"Things were also too mellow, too bland, like an egg that needs salt."

She packed up and moved to Paterson.

But many others in the suburbs decide to stay there, feeling that the security, better education, and higher quality of life outweigh cross-racial or cross-cultural misunderstandings. The girl who begged to leave Ridgewood says this is home -- forever, if she can help it.

"Now I don't want to move," Cassandra says. "I want to raise my kids here. I'd live anywhere in Ridgewood, not only in this section."

Her father smiles. "I knew she'd conquer it," he says.

Minorities, says Arthur Bryant, who recently became a minister, should not feel that the suburbs are "for other people."

"You don't know what peace I feel here in Ridgewood," he says. "I used to hear sirens, people screaming, fighting. Now I can sit outside and actually hear the birds."