Palo Alto's history of redlining

Segregationist policies, tendencies of the past remain prevalent

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The divide between East Palo Alto and Palo Alto is undeniable.

From the achievement gap to the literal splitting of the cities by the Bayshore Freeway, East Palo Alto and Palo Alto face a cultural split so large many East Palo Alto residents attending school in Palo Alto feel like they live two separate lives, former East Palo Alto Mayor Laura Martinez said.

"I feel like I grew up in two cities because I had friends and extracurricular activities after school in both," Martinez said. "It was like living in two worlds."

For an affluent city that preaches racial tolerance, Palo Alto's controversial history with fair housing issues is often ignored.

Despite being located across the country from the Jim Crow era south, the Palo Alto of the early to mid-1900s exhibited segregationist behaviors.

From blatant redlining to Ku Klux Klan rallies marching on University Ave., the racist tendencies of Palo Alto's history have had long-lasting effects on the community even today, particularly for local minorities and students of color.

The History:

Palo Alto entered the 20th century as a town of around 1,500 according to the United States Census but quickly grew to 6,000 by 1920. However, increases in the Black and Asian populations of Palo Alto during this time period prompted the Chamber of Commerce to pass a resolution vowing to force all incoming minority residents into a segregated district.

The Northern California American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California described the spirit of the resolution as a guideline for realtors in the Palo Alto housing market.

The real estate industry carried out these segregationist policies using a combination of block-busting, where realtors identify neighborhoods to sell houses to African Americans and encourage white residents to leave, white-only deed restrictions and not insuring mortgages in non-white neighborhoods.

These actions pushed minority buyers into what would later become East Palo Alto. Incorporated in 1983, the city had a 60% Black population at that time, compared to the 2.3% black population in Palo Alto.

The racial makeup of East Palo Alto has shifted to predominantly Hispanic or Latinx, but, whether through segregational real-estate practices or unequal housing opportunities, the redlining of Palo Alto continues.

Palo Alto

$2,000,000 +
Median home value

$157,120
Median household income

81.9%
Adults with bachelor's degree or higher

The 101:

The Bayshore Freeway, a segment of Highway 101, splits Palo Alto and East Palo Alto into two cities and redirects residents of color away from Palo Alto.

Initially constructed in 1962, the freeway contributes to the economic and racial segregation of Palo Alto and East Palo Alto, as visible today in Palo Alto's lack of Black and Latinx residents.

According to 2019 Census data, only 1.6% of Palo Alto residents identify as African American. In East Palo Alto over 10% of residents identify as African American. The percent of people who identify as white in Palo Alto is nearly 60%, while in East Palo Alto the number is 30%. These are still two different cities, and barriers built in the past hinder meaningful change.

East Palo Alto

$704,500
Median home value

$64,792
Median household income

18.8%
Adults with bachelor's degree or higher

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS

Gentrification:

The dramatic differences in education and housing opportunity between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto provide a clear example of the effects of redlining. Known as the murder capital of the world in 1992, East Palo Alto has re-established its image as a safe, suburban, Silicon Valley suburb. But because of its proximity to Stanford and major tech corporations, it has also become subject to the effects of gentrification.

According to Census data, East Palo Alto's Black population has fallen significantly. In 1980, 55% of the city's residents were Black. In 2013, that number was just 15%. East Palo Alto's median household income has shown minimal growth from $39,597 in 1980 to $46,932 in 2013. This loss of Black residents is a clear indicator of residential displacement. As housing prices increase but wages remain relatively stagnant, this disparity median forces long-time residents to exit the city.

East Palo Alto, previously considered a backwater of affluent Silicon Valley, has seen steady increases in the cost of living and is nearly as unaffordable as Palo Alto. High rent and mortgage rates from increasingly high property values force low-income residents to relocate to lower-income neighborhoods.

Palo Alto Historical Association member Steve Staiger said while some East Palo Alto residents were forced out of the city because of the surge in housing prices, many chose to leave because their neighborhoods became gentrified.

"Part of it is there was a sizable population of Black people in East Palo Alto who, as they got older, were suddenly owning a house with much greater value in a community they maybe didn't want because it was changing," Staiger said. "I think there are others who definitely got pushed out, but for those who earlier had bought the property ... as the property value went up and their community became less a part of them and they became less a part of the community, it was easier for them to leave."

What good does activism on social media do?

In the wake of multiple global humanitarian crises, students use online platforms to share resources, support with

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For some, activism means getting on your feet and protesting, calling representatives or donating to organizations supporting your cause. But a new form of "activism" is sweeping the nation, especially among youth, in this time of national unrest.

In response to the seemingly endless stream of social and environmental justice issues currently plaguing society, many students have taken to social media to express their advocacy and provide resources for change. But this influx of so-called activism begs the question: how effective can social media activism really be?

Paly is located in one of the wealthiest regions in America. It is predominantly white and Asian, with very little negative police presence.

Yet, we as a community and a school convey messages of inclusivity and equality. So why is a town so self-righteously woke so extremely ignorant?

Wealthy communities are almost always a by-product of redlining, which is the systematic denial of services by federal agencies, local government, and the private sector either directly or indirectly, through the selective raising of prices.

The differences between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto are a prime example of the effects of redlining.

When the 1990s Silicon Valley tech boom made its way to Palo Alto, housing prices surged and the standard of living increased dramatically. Meanwhile, in 1992, East Palo Alto had the highest per-capita homicide rate in the country, surpassing Compton and Washington, D.C. That year, it was known as the murder capital of the world.

Twenty-five years later, the murder rate in East Palo Alto has fallen almost to zero, and violent crime rates have dropped about 60%. So how did this happen? Did Palo Alto fork over some of its fortune to help its struggling neighbor?

No.

Some people might cite the way Palo Alto students rallied in East Palo Alto as an example of how relations have changed for the better, but that's not enough for such a liberal town to claim it's over its disgraceful and negligent past. The reality is that Palo Alto students and community members discuss politics on a global level without realizing where they stand at a local level.

It is so easy to show your support for police reform and the protection of Black Lives through a post on your social media accounts. But without educating yourself on the history of your community and school, you are just as ignorant as those you "call out" through your phone. Real courage takes place in person.

East Palo Alto's road to recovery actually came from within its own police station. The town turned to community policing after former San Francisco Assistant Police Chief Albert Pardini became the Police Chief in East Palo Alto. The town rebuilt its relationship and trust with the police officers, and their police genuinely embody the notion, "to protect and serve."

So, why is it that hundreds of Palo Alto teens, many of whom have never experienced the full scope of over-policing, stop and frisk, and police brutality, condemn the police publicly on the streets of Palo Alto, of all places?

Chances are, as Paly students, the only negative interaction with the police we've had has been from a party being shut down.

So why are students so vocal on social media about reform if they haven't experienced such oppression? Although it is important to spread awareness, how effective is a social media post that has appeared elsewhere numerous times?

Paly is guilty of pushing a progressive, highly democratic agenda, while neglecting their students of color. Just look at Paly's achievement gap — it speaks for itself.

How effective is your post when you are pushing it into an echo chamber? What efforts have you made outside of social media to show your solidarity and your support for people of color or the people of East Palo Alto? How much have you listened? How much have you donated? How much have you protested? How much have you phone banked on behalf of Breonna Taylor? On behalf of George Floyd? On behalf of Elijah McClain?

When Jacob Blake's sister said she doesn't want your pity and prayers, did it make you take a second to consider who really benefits from your social media post, aside from yourself?

Question your actions and consistently check your privilege.

At the end of the day, activism of any form is never inherently bad. However, it's imperative that you make the same efforts in the real world that you do in your posts on social media.

ART BY GIANNA BROGLEY