Opening Our Eyes to the Tragic Legacy of Segregation

by Julia Occhiogrosso

Thirty years ago I moved into a neighborhood just west of downtown Las Vegas known to locals as the Westside. New to town, and wishing to find a Catholic Worker Hospitality House, I chose an area nearby the the only folks we knew in Las Vegas, the Franciscan Friars. Like the Franciscans, the Catholic Worker often founded communities in poorer neighborhoods to live among the people they aim to serve.

At twenty five years old, my intentions were idealistic, but admittedly ignorant of the history of the neighborhood, and the story of segregation in this city.

In hindsight, I regret that I did not spend more time familiarizing myself with the people and stories of this neighborhood before assuming an entitled welcome. Like the flawed thinking of missionaries, there was an underlying assumption that somehow we as the “do gooders” could enter without invitation or understanding, a right of mobility that was denied African Americans for centuries.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to forge relationships with some of the elders of this community. Many migrated from the South during the early forties to find work. They had hopes of finding a better life, but much of their hopes were blocked by government policies that implicitly fostered segregation all across the country.

I had heard the stories of how Black entertainers like Sammy Davis Jr., Pearl Bailey, Lena Horne, Nat King Cole and others were not permitted to stay in the strip hotels that benefited from their talent and how early residents lived in tents or homes built out of scrap materials. Our friend Ina Bell told how her husband built their home from piecing together discarded two-by-four scraps.

Recently, I was invited by Nevadans for the Common Good (NCG) to attend a Conference with Richard Rothstein, author of The Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America. NCG is a nonpartisan organization of faith-based institutions and non-profits who advocate around social justice issues. We gathered in Oakland with other similar organizations from western states who, in many cases, are concerned with housing issues.

Rothstein’s book and presentation gave us information about the history of housing in this country that is relevant for groups looking to remedy the current housing crisis.

Rothstein describes in extensive detail the historic facts that demonstrate how policies of discrimination impacted the creation of poor, underserved, segregated neighborhoods across the country. “Policies that excluded African Americans from housing opportunities created economic, social and political fallout that perpetuates today and will continue for the foreseeable future.”

After the depression, acute housing shortages plagued the nation. The U.S. government’s Public Works Administration constructed housing developments all over the country for working and lower-middle income families. These developments were mostly intended for white families and were guided by policies which fostered segregation and excluded African Americans. Working people of the segregated West Las Vegas neighborhood were among those left out, living in tents and salvaging material to build makeshift homes.

Even with court decisions that incrementally challenged the constitutionality of these policies, other tactics emerged to counter these decisions and prolonged the momentum of segregation.

Red-lining forbade financially-eligible African Americans from securing loans from banks and federally-financed housing developments. Racially restrictive covenants which were stipulations in federal-financed housing developments. African American veterans were unable to redeem the benefits of the GI Bill because of these exclusionary policies attached to federally-financed-housing.

This prompted African Americans who wanted to purchase homes to resort to contract sales. With contract sales, homes (continued on back page)
**“Tough Love”**

*by Robert Majors*

We feed in the morning, if no one else does. When shelters are closing the sun’s coming up. When it’s hard to get going the going gets tough. Sometimes a tough moment can use a tough love. One that will stand in cold and in pain. That would give what it had without knowing your name. That would sit in a jail before turning its face on the right thing to do in the “wrong” kind of way. A love that is hard on the one who delivers, and strengthens the faith of love in its giver.

(continued from front page) were sold at inflated prices and the buyer would only attain ownership after 15 to 20 years of prompt monthly installments which did not accrue any equity until paid off, and often resulted in evictions from one late or missed payment.

For many of us, these stories of discrimination and exclusionary practices represent remnants of the distant past, found in random, unenlightened cities across the country. Yet, it is clear that these actions of the past had a pervasive and undeniable impact on the ability of African Americans to secure the dream of financial stability and progress many whites have inherited through home ownership.

Rothstein contends that unlike the common consensus, these discriminatory acts were not the

product of incidental bigotry, happenstance or accident, but instead, the direct consequence of unconstitutional policy, and warrant a public call for policies that move toward retribution and restoration.

I cannot do justice to the thorough and scholarly content of Rothstein’s writing, nor can I give ample attention to the trauma and hardship experienced by the victims of these policies. I only hope to point our readers, people who care about alleviating the sufferings of social injustice, to be awakened from the false narratives that all too often define our perspectives and perpetuate a stance of inaction.

While my arrival in this neighborhood may have been unannounced, I am grateful for the chance to cultivate relationships with people who have endured with courage and grace. Perhaps by being receptive to learning the history of segregation, people of faith can show mercy and compassion, put aside the destructive behaviors of racism and move toward seeing the sacred in all.

Volunteer & Donor Party at the Catholic Worker: Sat., April 27, 9 a.m.-Noon Brunch served, Playful Competition, Fellowship R.S.V.P.: Julia: (702) 647-0728 or julia@lvcw.org

**Nineteenth Annual Nevada Clay Guild Empty Bowl Benefit**

Saturday, March 30, 2019
11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
Green Valley High School Cafeteria, 460 Arroyo Grande Blvd. (just North of Warm Springs Rd.) Henderson, NV / Adults: $25 Children & All Students: $15 Additional Bowls: $15

A lunch of soup and bread will be served in hand-made bowls. Each attendee will select their own unique ceramic bowl made by members and friends of the Nevada Clay Guild and keep it as a lasting reminder of world hunger. All proceeds from the luncheon will benefit the Las Vegas Catholic Worker and their soup line serving the poor and homeless. There will also be a silent auction of ceramic art. Tickets will be sold at the door. For advance tickets or info contact Julia Occhiogrosso at (702) 234-0755 or julia@lvcw.org, or Donna Potter at (702) 461-3398. Thanks to Green Valley High School, Aardvark Clay, and all the artists who made the bowls. This event is sponsored by the Nevada Clay Guild, Green Valley High School, Mission Hills Pottery and Aardvark Clay.

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