

Fair Housing: The Once and Future Struggle

The following article appeared in the program of the Intiman Theatre production of "A Raisin in the Sun" in April 2001.

Here is how housing used to work in Seattle:

Until the late 1960's, Seattle was a segregated city. If you were White, you could rent or buy a home wherever you could afford. If you were Black, you lived in the Central Area. New arrivals to the city encountered a well-oiled system of residential redlining, restrictive covenants, segregated schools, and limited access to restaurants, theaters and shops.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed neighborhood covenants in 1948, Seattle realtors and neighborhood groups continued the practice informally. The same year as the Supreme Court decision, the Seattle Real Estate Board expelled one of its members for selling a home in an all-white area to an interracial couple. In 1956, the Madrona-Denny Blaine Neighborhood Association voted against permitting nonwhites to live in the neighborhood. In 1964, Seattle voters rejected an "Open Housing" referendum to end racial discrimination in home sales and rentals. The margin of passage was nearly two to one.

Legal housing discrimination only ended in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., with the passage of federal open housing legislation. Seattle City Council passed its own open housing ordinance on April 19, 1968. Washington passed a statewide open housing law in 1969.

Here is how it works today in Seattle:

Just last year (in April 2000), the Seattle Office for Civil Rights released the results of a fair housing audit for discrimination in Seattle's rental market. To conduct the audit, White and Black testers posed as prospective renters who resembled each other in every respect but race. Out of 30 tests, 23% found racial discrimination. Black testers in another 13% of cases found evidence of discrimination, but were inconclusive.

In several cases, apartment owners showed an available unit to a White tester after telling a Black tester there were no vacancies. In other instances, landlords quoted higher rental rates or deposits to Black testers than to White. Black testers also found themselves on the receiving end of rude treatment and intrusive questions.

The audit also revealed housing discrimination against people with children. Out of 30 telephone tests, 13% revealed clear discrimination based on family status. Another 30% of the tests found evidence of discrimination, but were inconclusive.

The City of Seattle's Office for Civil Rights investigates complaints of illegal discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations and contracting. Last year, individuals filed more than 200 cases with SOCR – 68 based on housing. Why did people file? Because they were the wrong color, the wrong type of foreigner, the wrong type of family, or had the wrong type of disability.

safe streets, dynamic schools, green parks, healthy businesses, vibrant arts and entertainment. **A Raisin in the Sun** teaches us that our aspirations cross boundaries, borders and even neighborhoods.

Early in the play Mama muses, "Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back – And didn't none of it happen."

That was then; this is now. The City of Seattle is committed to a future where no family needs courage simply to open the curtains of their new home. Together, we will erase those lines that needlessly divide us. Together, we can be proud.

Celebrate National Fair Housing Month in April.

<http://www.cityofseattle.net/civilrights/dirwrites.htm#fair>