

Whitening of black neighborhoods on upswing

By Jamal E. Watson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

For a fleeting moment, Joyce Witherspoon had contemplated leaving her Harlem neighborhood—trading in her three-story brownstone for a spacious, four-bedroom home in Yonkers. But when she told her husband Andrew about her newly discovered idea, he would have none of it.

"I thought, 'Are you out of your mind?'" said Andrew Witherspoon, 56, who recently acquired a brownstone from elderly relatives who have long lived in the Hamilton Heights area of Harlem. "We're not just going to relinquish this property over to some white developers who will continue to gentrify this neighborhood. We have to stay."

All across the city, traditional Black neighborhoods, like Brooklyn's Fort Greene and Clinton Hill, and Queens' St. Alban's, are experiencing widespread gentrification, much to the dismay of longtime Black residents like Andrew Witherspoon.

In many cases, young,

educated, middle-class whites are staking out new territory and renting and purchasing homes in neighborhoods that have for the past few decades been largely working class, and almost entirely Black.

Many like Fort Greene resident Karlina Byers, 39, are worried that Blacks are quickly relinquishing property that was not easily acquired.

"Historically, we have had to fight to integrate certain neighborhoods, and when we moved in, white folks moved out," said Byers, who teaches history at a local charter school. "Now that white folks are getting priced out of their neighborhoods, they want to move back into our neighborhoods. I have a problem with this."

Byers worries that with the influx of this new cohort, cultural institutions, like Black churches and small businesses—long considered important staples in the Black community—may soon disappear.

"Look at Harlem," said Byers. "All of 125th Street

practically looks like a commercial shopping center to me. Fort Greene is not the neighborhood I used to know and love. It's so glitzy now."

Belinda Hardin, a sales associate with Harlem Homes, said most of those who are buying homes in Harlem these days tend to be "upper-class African-Americans, and immigrants mainly from France and Italy."

In Harlem, like Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant, a recent influx of Russians has also settled in tiny pockets of the sprawling neighborhood.

"I think they [immigrants] have a fascination with Harlem," said Hardin, who has been selling real estate in Harlem for almost two years. "They are more open to fitting in without wanting to take over."

It's the concerns of a "possible takeover" that has caused such an alarm in some neighborhoods, pushing a group of loosely organized activists to canvass the city, encouraging Black residents—particularly the elderly—to hold on to their properties. A

flier for a recent community meeting encouraging residents to speak out against gentrification in Queens read: "Once this community leaves Black, it ain't ever going back."

But young white professionals, who, according to census data, are integrating these neighborhoods, say they are unfairly being targeted.

"There is a whole group of white people like myself who really want to live in Black neighborhoods not simply because the housing is cheaper but because we enjoy Black culture," said Annie Merkowitz, 26, who recently relocated to Harlem from Jersey City. "Our parents were part of the whole white flight, moving out of these neighborhoods, but the younger generation of white people like myself have decided to consciously move back in."

The transition hasn't been easy for Merkowitz either. She said she gets the occasional mean stares from her neighbors, who probably wonder why she has decided to settle just 10 blocks north of 125th Street. "I think there

is some suspicion," said Merkowitz, who has been renting but is in the process of buying and renovating a dilapidated brownstone. "I understand that suspicion, but I am here because I love this neighborhood. I am not trying to screw the Black folks who live here."

Some have argued that gentrification should be embraced by Blacks, who fought hard, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement, to integrate all-white neighborhoods.

And it's hard, some say, to argue with the evidence: Gentrification has improved the quality of life for all of its.

But some, like Arthur J. Sheppard, the executive director of the Magnolia Tree Earth Center, a nonprofit environmental organization in Bedford-Stuyvesant, wonders at what cost.

"What happens to the people who are outpriced in the housing market?" he asked.

Over the past few years, Sheppard has watched as outsiders, most of whom have been white, canvass neighborhood, leaving business cards asking locals to give

them a call should they decide to sell their brownstones.

Amos Jones, a journalist who has written extensively on race and class issues in New York City, said the term "gentrification" is itself a bit misleading.

"When white families move into Bed-Sty, this is viewed as gentrification," he said. "My experience has been that we do not use that same kind of terminology when we talk about upper-class Blacks who move into working-class neighborhoods."

Call it what you will, but Andrew Witherspoon knows one thing is certain: He will never surrender his three-story brownstone.

"It's my most valuable asset," he said. "I never went to business school, but I ain't no fool either. Why sell a pot of gold?"

This is the first in a series of articles about gentrification in New York City. Next week, we will examine middle-class Blacks who are gentrifying some of the city's neighborhoods.

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SBI

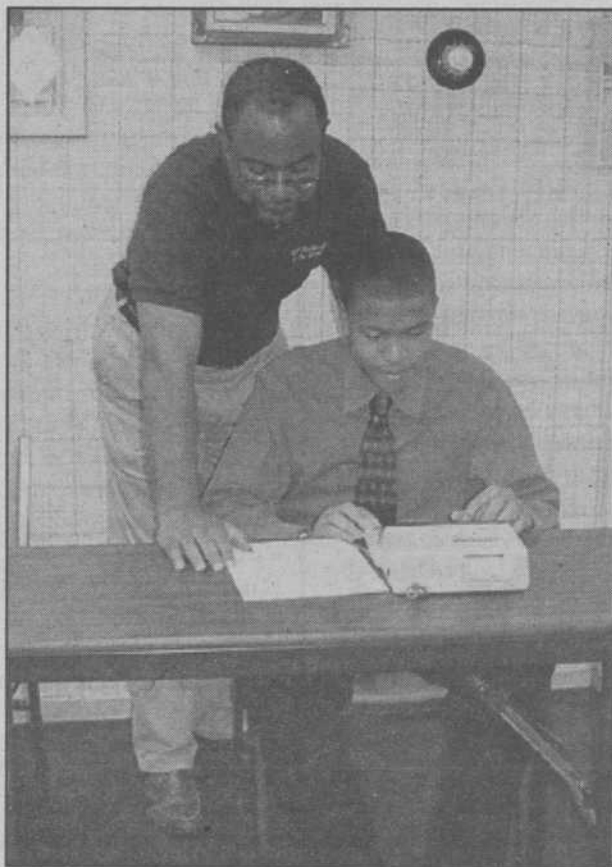
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Workshops include guest speakers. This year, SBI is featuring two new components to the summer program: a teen summit and youth forum and government day.

The summit and youth forum will allow teens to meet with each other to discuss common issues and concerns. Government day will be an opportunity for teens to meet and talk with elected officials about policies and laws that may affect them.

SBI has grown from humble beginnings in 1995 with eight students to more than 100 students and mentors and 70 businesses with the availability of scholarships. SBI is truly a shining success.

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(above) Mike Waller, owner of MR Bookkeeping, counsels Brandon Campbell on the finer points of accounting. (adjacent) Seven Seas owner Lou Connor oversees SBI's La Deetra Walker as she prepares to whip up a culinary delight.

Photos Special to Sentinel-Voice



Julian Bond

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did in 2000, the no-show National Guardsman [Bush] in the White House and his draft avoiding Vice President [Dick Cheney] will lose the White House by three million votes," Bond says.

Bond has had his own experiences with draft resistance. In a special election in 1965, Bond was elected to a one-year term in the Georgia House of Representatives, but members of the House voted not to seat him because of his outspoken opposition to the war in Vietnam. After winning a second election in 1966, again for one year, the Georgia House again voted to bar him from membership. After winning a third elec-

tion to a two-year term in November 1966, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the Georgia House had violated Bond's rights in refusing him his seat. After the ruling, he took his House seat.

Knowing from experience the importance of voting, Bond says next year's election is critical.

"... Voter registration and voter turnout must be a top priority for every branch and every state conference from now to election day," Bond says. "The countdown starts now. If a branch isn't registering voters and isn't preparing now for a grassroots turnout program next year, it isn't doing its job."

Instead of a color-blind society, Bond says, America is "color-coded."

Although all nine Democratic candidates for president are expected to make an appearance at the NAACP convention, President Bush has turned down an invitation to speak at the convention for the third consecutive time. He has not spoken at an NAACP annual convention since 2000, when he was a presidential candidate.

"If Hispanics, Blacks and Whites turn out in 2004 in the same percentages as they

did in 2000, the no-show National Guardsman [Bush] in the White House and his draft avoiding Vice President [Dick Cheney] will lose the White House by three million votes," Bond says.

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