

# Despite diversity, LA still a segregated city

By Tony Castro

Special to Sentinel-Voice

LOS ANGELES (NNPA) — During his mayoral campaign, Antonio Villaraigosa spent one long day and evening mixing with supporters at coffee klatches in the Hollywood Hills, with gay activists in West Hollywood, with Westside liberals in homes in Bel Air and Westwood and winding up at a contributor's estate in Brentwood.

The jaunt had taken him up Mulholland Drive above the Hollywood Bowl, into the winding roads behind Sunset Plaza, along Sunset Boulevard west, through the Bel Air gates next door to Elizabeth Taylor's house on Mines Road and ultimately to the home of a couple that had once raised money for Ross Perot's presidential campaign.

In the course of the day, Villaraigosa had shaken hands with every shade of the multi-ethnic rainbow he often boasted as being the backbone of Los Angeles' diversity: a Japanese-American surgeon, an Israeli-born designer, an Argentine filmmaker, several Jewish families including one that begged him to attend their daughter's bat mitzvah that weekend, a Mexican-American psychologist, a lesbian couple celebrating their first wedding anniversary, an Indian food caterer, an Armenian-American plastic surgeon to the stars, a Latino valet parking attendant from his native Boyle Heights, and, of course, a large number of others sociologists might call the "White ethnics."

Conspicuously absent, although no one commented on it at the time, were any African-American faces.

Villaraigosa, the next mayor of the city he says "represents America's greatest hope," had campaigned almost an entire day in what amounted to a still racially segregated Los Angeles.

For despite all the talk about Los Angeles' diversity — Villaraigosa himself calling it "the most diversified city in the country" — both private studies and an analysis of census tracts show that Los Angeles remains a city still segregated by class and ethnicity, but particularly in the area that Americans traditionally have regarded as one of their inherent, if increasingly fleeting, birthrights: housing.

Two recent USC studies

have found that Los Angeles continues to be plagued with racially isolated neighborhoods — with infinitesimally small integration in historically White communities, especially the Westside of Los Angeles, which are statistically the safest and have the highest performing public schools.

"The paradox is that Whites and Blacks have become more isolated and especially Whites," says Philip Ethington, the author of the studies and a historian at USC who studies segregation in Los Angeles.

"What is troubling is that the divide is getting worse. This suggests that this is not a temporary stage... We have found a clear pattern of 're-segregation.'"

The USC studies and Ethington's ongoing research are the latest in findings by scholars that bring a sobering reality to the widespread observation that Los Angeles, as a metropolitan area, has become more and more diverse — a conclusion that one study suggests has been a misleading reading of the highly diverse workforce in Los Angeles, especially on the Westside.

Residents of Los Angeles are far less racially and ethnically segregated at work than they are in their home neighborhoods, according to a University of Washington study.

"The differences are striking. By day, the region is a more mixed place, roughly half as segregated, than it is by night," said Mark Ellis, a one-time resident of Los Angeles who headed the Washington study.

"So Beverly Hills or Brentwood, for example, are not only for wealthy predominantly White residents. There also are a large number of people from other groups who come to work there every day and make the neighborhoods work. They mow the grass, clean the house and take care of the kids. It is the ultimate irony. The wealthy try to seal themselves off from the working poor, but still need them to make their community work."

Although those findings of racial isolation in Los Angeles housing do not belie the racial and ethnic diversity that political and civic leaders have been lauding in recent years, experts say the two are almost exclusive of each other.

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— Camille Zubrinsky Charles  
Professor at the University of Pennsylvania

"Politicians like to say that diversity is our greatest strength," said Ron Wakabayashi, formerly executive director of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations and now with the Justice Department's Community Relations Service. "That is b.s. Diversity simply is. The core question is how do we extract its assets while minimizing its liabilities?"

More significantly, experts point to the reality that while Angelenos of different races and ethnicities may often work and vote side-by-side — they live side-by-side in small and sometimes infinitesimal numbers.

African-Americans, according to 2000 census data, make up only 1.93 percent of the population of Bel Air; 1.77 percent of Beverly Hills; 2.48 percent of Brentwood; 3.09 percent of West Hollywood; 1 percent of the Pacific Palisades; and do not even register a hundredth of a percent in Westwood.

Professor Ethington, who has been tracing segregation in Los Angeles since the 1940 census, says that while civil rights laws of the 1960s may have wiped out discrimination in housing and other areas, an uneven playing field in real estate still remained.

"In the Westside and the beach areas, Whites had gotten in on the valuable pieces of property early on," says Ethington. "And they saw the steepest increases in property values..."

"By the time [African-Americans] were able to buy, they weren't able to because of economic means. The prices of those valuable pieces of property had already gotten out of what they could afford."

Cheryl Cook, a resident of upscale Ladera Heights which with its views of the Pacific has become one of the wealthiest areas in the country, offers a telling example of how African-Americans of means have made their

choice on where to live. In the 1990s, when she and her family were looking for a new home, they found comparable homes on the Westside out of their price range.

"We could have bought in Cheviot Hills, Santa Monica or the South Bay," says Cook, "but the difference in price would have been greater for a lot less."

But another study produced as recently as the mid-1990s found that even in the early 1990s discrimination and prejudice against minorities was the best explanation for racial housing segregation. It also concluded that other common explanations for segregation — that racial

groups choose to live together or that minorities can't afford to buy houses or rent apartments in White neighborhoods — were not supported by the study.

"There have been many reasons given as to why American cities are segregated, but racial prejudice and discrimination still provide the best answer given the evidence," said Camille Zubrinsky Charles, now a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who co-authored the study with Lawrence Bobo, a sociologist at UCLA.

Some experts have argued that African-Americans themselves are most responsible for segregation because they want to live in predominantly Black neighborhoods — a conclusion that Zubrinsky Charles said was disproved by her study, in which African-Americans in Los Angeles surveyed said their ideal neighborhood would have between 27 percent and 50 percent non-Blacks.

Zubrinsky Charles maintains that the underlying fac-

tor contributing to segregation continues to be racial prejudice.

"Racial segregation isn't occurring because Blacks and Latinos are too poor to live with Whites," says Zubrinsky Charles.

"The results from the surveys are not surprising, but they're still disappointing. There's still quite a bit of prejudice and discrimination that's preventing integration in our cities."

More telling, still, says Zubrinsky Charles, is what the continuing segregation in Los Angeles augurs for the city in terms of race relations.

"The lack of regular contact between Blacks and Whites and Latinos reinforces negative attitudes," she says.

"Segregation perpetuates poverty, inequality and the stereotypes of Blacks and Latinos as welfare-dependent [and] criminally inclined. A neighborhood setting would be a place for these attitudes to change."

Tony Castro writes for WAVE Newspapers.

*Black Jewels*

In 1879, a black man set a marathon record.

In the late 19th century, when it was common practice for gamblers to bribe or threaten Black athletes into purposely losing events, Frank Hart flatly refused to be a pawn for their profit.

By 1879, Hart made sports history in a 6-day marathon event held at Madison Square Garden. At the end of the race, as Hart crossed the finish line, the huge crowd rose to give him a standing ovation. Never before, in any sporting event, had a Black athlete been awarded so much prize money or been received with such a warm welcome by fans both black and white, alike.

Frank Hart, the unsung hero of marathon champions, is a true Black Jewel in sports history.

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