

Fair Housing: Organizing for Action Against Discrimination by V. Elaine Gross  
LONG ISLAND HOUSING SERVICES CONFERENCE  
November 13, 2003

Good morning everyone. I must begin my remarks by acknowledging the tireless work of the Long Island Housing Services, its board and staff and the Director, Michelle Santantonio.

When Michelle asked me if I would provide some opening remarks for this conference, I was honored to do so. Because, as most of you probably know, the focus of ERASE Racism is to identify and address institutional racism. When I use the term institutional racism, I'm talking about the structures, policies and behaviors that create segregation and inequality. I'm not talking about personal prejudice or bias. I'm talking about America's dirty little secret. And I know I'm not supposed to talk about secrets.....

Long Island's segregated housing patterns are a very visible and very persistent example of institutionalized racism at work. You may remember the media coverage of the research commissioned by ERASE Racism in the spring of last year, which shined a spotlight on some startling statistics. When analyzing US Census Bureau data, Long Island is, at least, the third most segregated suburban community in the country when measuring black/white residential segregation. So LIHS' work and ERASE Racism's work is very intertwined, and we share a fierce commitment to striking down the barriers to fair housing. We are committed to breaking the silence.

In early 2004, we will release the results of some work we are doing together as part of ERASE Racism's Fair Housing Project. My staff is looking at fair housing enforcement activities and it has not been a reassuring process. There appear to be serious deficiencies in our fragmented system for promoting fair housing.

This conference today will address a variety of issues related to fair housing. In the time that I have, my remarks will center on housing segregation on Long Island due to race. In order for me to talk about housing on Long Island today, however, I must first call our attention to a little history. The U. S. Supreme Court Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 upheld the legality of separate but equal railroad cars and stated that the U.S. Constitution's 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment dealt with political not social equality. This decision sanctioned the adoption throughout the South of a comprehensive series of Jim Crow Laws. And this pattern of overt segregation was not successfully challenged until 1954, some 58 years later, with the U.S. Supreme Court Brown v. Board of Education decision striking down segregated public school educational facilities. It wasn't until 1968 that the Fair Housing Act was passed by Congress, signaling that people should not be discriminated against in their search for housing because of race.

So, you may ask, why do I mention this history? First of all, in many ways we, as a society, do not truly understand how institutionalized racism has shaped and continues to shape our government policies, our business practices, and our individual and collective actions at work, at home and at play. Secondly, we don't truly accept the fact that institutional racism **almost always guarantees that separate is seldom equal**. As John Powell, the legal scholar and researcher says in the PBS video "Race the Power of an Illusion,"

At one point we had explicit laws that say whites are on top and blacks are on the bottom. Today, we have many of the same practices without the explicit language, and those practices are largely inscribed in geography. Geography does the work of the Jim Crow laws, so many people are confused as to why after 50 years of civil rights, our schools are still segregated, our housing is still segregated, etc. When whites are all by themselves, they're taking all the resources with them; they're taking all the amenities with them. But when blacks are all by themselves, they can't get loans, etc.

I would add that this phenomenon is due to the characteristics of racism. Racism combines racial prejudice with systemic and institutional power to exclude. Powell goes on to say, "what's really slick about whiteness, if you

will, is that most of the benefits can be obtained without ever doing anything personally. You get the spoils of a racist system, even if you are not personally or overtly racist.” What he’s talking about here is often referred to as white privilege. So, if you are white you have access. You can choose from a much broader array of communities when you are looking to rent an apartment or buy a house, just because you are white. It’s an unearned privilege.

Of course, if you are wealthy and white your options will increase even more. But I don’t want us to get distracted here. I know that some folks really believe that housing problems are basically economically based. But economics only partially describe the challenges we face.

There is already affordable housing on Long Island, not enough and we need more, but blacks seldom have access to the affordable housing that exists. And there is more expensive housing that blacks of higher incomes seldom have access to. In fact two thirds of Long Island’s cities, towns and villages remain less than 1% African American. Ninety percent of Long Island’s African American residents live in just 20% of its communities. Although economically segregated housing is prevalent on Long Island, the U.S. Census data confirm that in predominately African American communities, the income levels of residents include families with very low income levels, as well as higher income professionals.

The Website of The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University speaking about national trends states that “Economic differences explain only a small fraction of the existing segregation. Though incomes differ substantially by race, there is enough overlap of income and variation in housing prices within communities so that there would be no all black or all white Census tracts in most metropolitan areas if economics determined residence.”<sup>1</sup>

The Long Island Census data seem to support this premise, at least in part, because lower income whites are present in a greater number of communities than blacks, and even other people of color, such as Long Island’s growing Hispanic community are more dispersed, settling in some areas that still remain off limits to African Americans. And, let me say, that this is statistically true even though we are all aware of and appalled by the fire bombing this year of a Latino family who was living in the “wrong” neighborhood.

So, what is wrong with this picture? I believe that we must take seriously housing segregation on Long Island and the inherent inequalities of that segregation. This pattern is the product of institutional racism.

As many of you know, Long Island’s segregated housing patterns have deep roots. The National Housing Act of 1934, which created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), was the engine behind suburban development, fueling that development with explicit racial criteria to form racially homogenous neighborhoods. The federal government required or promoted a series of devices to ensure racial homogeneity, such as, deeds with racially restrictive covenants, the manual of home appraisal standards for private home mortgage lending, the underwriting manual for FHA mortgage lending, and other policies. Local housing developers, the banking industry and local governments willingly embraced these devices. The real estate industry on Long Island, as elsewhere, was an active partner in perpetuating racial segregation in housing. And the illegal yet common practices of the real estate industry, most especially racial steering, continue today.

In my earlier comments, I described how institutional racism shaped every institution in the country in the past and today. How it creates segregation and inequality. Well, housing segregation is bad enough in its own right. But because where you live determines where your children go to school, housing segregation begets school segregation. And you only need look at the annual New York State Public School Performance reports to see that separate is not equal when it comes to Long Island’s public schools. And where you go to school influences what type of job you will get, and so on and so on.

To address these issues, ERASE Racism and more than a dozen Long Island Universities are co-sponsoring *Brown v. Board of Education: The Unfinished Agenda*, marking the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Brown decision. On Monday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, there will be a kick-off joint conference.

I realize I haven't presented a very pretty picture. But every time I think, well Elaine, you don't need to talk about this, everybody knows about this already; I am surprised by what I hear. When participating in meetings and the issue of fair housing comes up, it is not unusual to hear someone say in a very dismissive fashion, well, we have fair housing laws to take care of that. We don't need to talk about that. Yes, we have fair housing laws, but they are not undoing institutional racism in housing. Our collective silence is undermining fair housing.

Silence is a dangerous thing. By our silence we perpetuate institutional racism. By our silence, we lend support to the invisibility of institutional racism. By our silence, we condone institutional racism in housing, which makes Long Island separate and unequal. Let's break the silence. Let's put fair housing back on the public agenda.