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A Weed Grows in East Palo Alto

Infiltration, taxation, and discrimination – these are the stages of adaptation seen in cities around the world. The outcomes surround us daily but emerge nearly unnoticed. This large-scale alteration is known in the news as gentrification, but it is far too complicated for a single 14 letter word. With countless definitions and countless perspectives, gentrification is a widespread issue that directly affects students around the country, and specifically in East Palo Alto.

Gentrification, by definition, is “the process of renovating and improving a house or district so that it conforms to middle-class taste” (“gentrification”). However, this definition totally misrepresents what gentrification truly is. It is more than a new mall opening down the street, it's more than coffee shops and hipsters, it's more than construction. What this definition fails to include is the impact on the people on either side. The key point of gentrification is one crowd coming in and pushing out another. From an administrative standpoint, it simply comes down to economic prosperity. But what actually happens is the people in charge make decisions strictly out of the desire to attract affluent people, and then the price of living in the community goes up and up until the people who were meant to be helped can no longer afford to live there.

The displacement of underprivileged residents illustrates that gentrification is legalized and systematic discrimination. In particular, this is impacting children in East Palo Alto today.

I. Chronology

Once considered the murder capital of the country, East Palo Alto has a history of gunfire and homicides. In 1992, there were 42 murders; this year, so far, there haven't been any (Mosley, 2018). Today, East Palo Alto is home to many major tech companies such as Facebook and Amazon. As gentrification creeps through the streets of American cities, it rears its ugly head in many different ways, depending on the specific location and circumstances. For example, in New Orleans, following hurricane Katrina, politicians used the city's destruction as an opportunity to completely rebuild the neighborhoods and attract new people. Today, the New Orleans you see on brochures and tv shows is not the same city that beamed culture, tradition, and community. In East Palo Alto, this sort of transformation occurred mainly as a result of the tech boom.

Gentrification is not integration. By finding the balance between gentrification and integration, there may be a benefit to the surrounding community as children learn to “value exposure to diversity and economic inequality” (Gomez, 2017). However, the difference that must be considered is “forced displacement and imposed cultural shift” (Godsil). Rachel Godsil, in her article for the NYU Furman center, explains that she believes there needs to be a consideration on whether population changes are due to a hope for racially and economically integrated communities or because of affluent people “having the means to make choices” (Godsil, 2014). “The problem is that gentrification currently causes nonconsensual exit” (Godsil). Matt Barnum, the head national reporter of Chalkbeat with a focus on education policy,

wrote in his article “An Integration Dilemma”, that “the same school choice programs that maintain or exacerbate school segregation can encourage residential integration” (Barnum, 2018).

II. Scene 1: The Problem

One of the most significant impacts of gentrification is a rise in rents which leads to the displacement of residents. In places like East Palo Alto, students and families often have to move houses; as a result, children have to change school because the families can no longer afford to live in the same neighborhood. Michele Sharkey, the executive director of the San Francisco 49ers Academy (a public middle school in East Palo Alto), stresses that being a young child, “having to have a break in your education is traumatic, to have to leave your friends and community and go to a whole new school because you can't afford to live in your home community any more, that's huge”. In some cases the children's lives lose nearly all sense of stability as some kids are staying at their friends' houses, sleeping in their cars, and/ or moving from place to place on a nightly basis to find a place to stay. Since the opening of the 49ers Academy in 1996, insecure housing has almost doubled from 25% to 50% (Sharkey).

When this displaced child then goes to school it can be understandably really hard for them to focus and be present in their academics. “The students bring [this] emotional trauma and impact into the classroom and then its [reasonably] harder for them to learn, and harder for them to concentrate because they have all of these basic needs on their mind” (Gragg). When Deshaun was asked about how gentrification impacts his life, he did not even mention school. This is direct evidence of how students in East Palo Alto understandably prioritize home and community issues over their education.

Kendra Gragg, a teacher at the 49ers Academy, shares a story of a family she worked with for a long time who had to move over and over again trying to hang on to housing in East Palo Alto until they reluctantly had to move out of the area completely. This was particularly heartbreaking for Mrs. Gragg as she worked for some time on helping the child in the family to find educational stability, and she claims he “was finally getting on the right track”. This instability can really damage the lives of students and their family. Deshaun Jordan, a sophomore at Oxford Day Academy and a former student at the 49ers Academy, has noticed that some kids who are being displaced attend a school outside of the town they live in. These kids who live out of the area have to leave school right away to avoid large masses of traffic due to the new and neighboring companies; therefore, they don't have time to meet with teachers after school or participate in extracurriculars or other school events that add a sense of community.

In her honors college thesis at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Marilyn Pineda stresses how displacement impacts students socially by making them unable to participate in extracurricular activities. Sharkey agrees: If a student does not have stable living arrangements this often affects them socially as they are unlikely to be involved in social activities, or do any of the things that build community in a school .

Instead, Deshaun spoke of displacement, large corporations, family businesses, community security and comfort, and cultural changes. Deshaun has a great understanding of the impacts of gentrification. According to Deshaun, Facebook offers their workers money to buy homes in the surrounding area (EPA), this ensures workers avoiding traffic and getting to work on time. So as these people move into EPA homes, rent costs rise to accommodate for this

newfound significance. As a result, community members are moving to places they can better afford like El Grove, Sacramento, and Gilroy (Jordan).

It is common knowledge that East Palo Alto was formerly known as the murder capital of the country, a reputation which still gives people who move into this area certain expectations and stereotypes. The things that are “normal” to the people who have lived in EPA for a while are sometimes seen as “scary or dangerous” to new people (Jordan). Deshaun also connects not being able to afford housing to kids getting into trouble. Kids carry the burden of their families, whether parents realize it or not; instead of listening to parents arguing or worrying about it themselves, kids often go out to avoid the stressors at home. Sometimes, new neighbors call the cops on teens, putting them in juvenile detention facilities or similar places. Deshaun feels this happens at an unreasonable rate and he believes this trend is the result of him and other kids in the area being stereotyped as “characters” by the new neighbors, and thus he fears he can get in trouble for anything. The racial divide often seen through cities may be partly because of the ‘guilty before proven’ mindset that plagues communities. This long-term caution is damaging to communities and puts people at an unease in their own neighborhood. Interestingly, Deshaun mentioned the impacts of nearly all perspectives: families, children, corporations, business owners, workers – almost everyone, except fellow students.

Low-income school districts get their funding based on attendance and enrollment while higher income areas get their funding from the tax base. This means if a community is of a higher income, the public school in that area is more heavily funded (Sharkey). Since 1995 the

district of East Palo Alto has dropped from 4500 students to nearly 2200; East Palo Alto lost nearly half of their students thus losing half of their operating budget.

Sharkey emphasizes that there is a major threat of public schools closing as charter schools enter the community and pull out large numbers of students; this, plus the displacement from gentrification, leads to a major loss of students. In *How To Kill a City*, P.E. Moskowitz tells of the detrimental effects of gentrification on specific cities. For instance, “Louisiana politicians used Katrina as an opportunity to shut down nearly every public school in New Orleans and replace them with charter schools...[Subsequently,] within months after the storm hit, 107 of the city’s 128 public schools had been transferred to a new, all charter district (Moskowitz, 27). Moskowitz accuses the city of New Orleans of offering “privatized schools and housing, bust[ing] unions, and [giving] tax breaks and other incentives to anyone who would bring money to the city” (Moskowitz 23-24).

Katherine B. Hankins, a professor at Georgia State University, makes the connection that middle and upper-class families that move into gentrifying neighborhoods generally are more likely to have kids that go to charter and private schools since they are more likely to afford it. Often these families move in and push for a charter school in the area with hopes of improving the opportunities for their kids (Hankins, 2007). In “Does School Choice Affect Gentrification?”, Reed Jordan and Megan Gallagher mention that “nonwhite low-income parents do not have the same opportunity to be able to exercise their school- choice options like the white upper- income parents do (Gallagher and Jordan, 2015).

According to Sharkey, “charter schools are detrimental to low income, small communities” because they have the power of a for-profit corporation behind them, so they are

doing huge campaigns to recruit students thus pulling kids out of public schools and with them, their funding (Sharkey). So the end product is public schools closing due to a turn to charter schools which may not be necessarily better institutions, but have far more funding through PR (Sharkey).

The way the Ravenswood School District is organized, students who went to middle school in East Palo Alto and students who went to middle school in Atherton (a very affluent area right down the street from EPA), end up going to the same high school, Menlo Atherton High. Students who have spent their lives battling day-to-day struggle in meeting basic needs such as food and shelter are put into high school with kids bred from privilege living in Menlo Park and Atherton.

Julissa Moreno, a sophomore at Menlo Atherton High School, has noticed a major difference between the community of her high school compared to her middle school experience at the 49ers Academy. She had to move in 7th grade due to rent increasing; this is when she moved into East Palo Alto. She speaks of how hard it was to enter a new school and a new community.

She has noticed a major change in the community of East Palo Alto in her 4 years of living there. As Julissa walks around her neighborhood she passes houses that used to belong to families she knew. She has noticed a large number of people moving and she claims this is because rent is rising and the people can no longer afford to live there. More than physical differences, she notices a major change in the EPA social structure. She feels that a lot of these new people “come in and judge [her] community” (Moreno). Julissa says she is aware of the

reputation East Palo Alto has but she says this reputation leads new people to make assumptions about the area and behave without really getting to know the people (Moreno).

III. Scene #2 The support given to stop it

All the above-stated issues, signs, and connections are the problems caused by gentrification. As mentioned earlier, kids from both EPA, Menlo Park, and Atherton go to the same high school. These kids come from totally different backgrounds, yet they are expected to be at the same point academically and perform the same. This is a great struggle for these students, but the solution isn't to expect more or less from students or hold dependent standards; the problem emerges when that needed support is not made available to the students. These kids' "social and home lives are very, very different," and institutionally schools need to keep this in mind and implement a way to assist all students in all backgrounds and encourage academic growth in uniform (Sharkey).

"These kids are brilliant and talented and amazing, they just need that equal opportunity and equal access" (Sharkey). Jordan and Gallagher suggest that teachers should "encourage discussions of racial and class differences" to create a more inclusive school environment, and bridge "cultural and class differences."

Schools, specifically the 49ers Academy, work to support the students affected by the community shift as they go through their academic journey. The 49ers Academy has implemented a program that offers a staff member the opportunity to work with Menlo Atherton High School and follow select kids from 9th to 12th grade. This staff member is someone that the student has known through middle school so that they may offer some familiarity and

comfort to the students (Sharkey). The adjustment from 49ers Academy to Menlo Atherton High School is known to be overwhelming. Julissa considered her 49ers community a family, while MA is much bigger and much more segregated (Moreno). While their school is separated by parental income, race, gender, and location of middle school, this program offers a space where the 49ers kids can find a sort of home base.

Academically, this program includes staff meeting with students and keeping them on track with school assignments. Another major component is the staff conferencing with the kids' teachers to act as a parent because a lot of the parents have language barriers and do not feel comfortable meeting with the teachers. This program is needs-based and offers a variety of support including the previously mentioned academic help, as well as paying for community participation for sports, prom, and other events. Currently this program is only offered to 49ers alumni, but the school hopes to start expanding; however, this would require significantly more funding to hire support staff (Sharkey). The graduation rate from East Palo Alto at MA used to be about 50%, yet after this past year, the rate has grown to almost 90% (Sharkey). This program performs a much-needed service (Sharkey).

Dashaun and Julissa are two young students who are more than aware of the issues plaguing their community. They are beyond their years in a way that is both sad and impressive. Kendra Gragg who, as mentioned, works as a ground level teacher, notices daily the "level of resiliency that [these] kids have" and she admires them for dealing with day to day struggle and continuing to "push through and try to perform as well as they can in the classroom" (Gragg).

IV. What Lies Ahead

Julissa Moreno and Deshaun Jordan both agree... we have the power to fight gentrification (Jordan and Moreno). "Getting our voice out... and coming together and having the confidence, having the energy, having the courage to come together and just fight" (Moreno). Julissa and Deshaun are in agreement that gentrification is going to "grow and grow, no matter what" (Moreno). Julissa believes the best chance her community has is to reach out and begin a movement of people working to solve the problem and raising their voices. The first thing that needs to be known is that "gentrification is not ok" (Moreno).

Deshaun says it is their obligation to get their community back (Jordan). That common racial divide is plaguing our streets and the only way to fight it is to come together. Deshaun hopes to see implementation of measures that lower rents to allow families to come back. While this is somewhat unlikely, America's youth is very strong as a collective voice at taking these matters to the streets.

Sidewalks devoured by weeds, ivy creeping up the sides of houses, corroded roads, and unkept fencing. Gentrification haunts East Palo Alto and cities like it, aging and altering communities. While well groomed and appealing to the eye, underneath, a weed grows, engulfing tradition, community, and culture.

In the end, it comes down to equity: equal consideration, equal opportunity, equal voice, equal education. Gentrification is not something that will come to an end anytime soon. It impacts children and families around the country, and they feel that they have no control. Don't ignore it, when you see the signs. If you care, then act, because you, and us, have the power.

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