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Mr. Greco

English 3

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Diagnosis: Gentrification

Julissa Moreno was content and comfortable in her home and school in Redwood City, where she had lived her whole life. Until a steep increase in rent forced Moreno and her family to leave Redwood City and move to a more affordable city, East Palo Alto, when she was only in the seventh grade. This process forced her to start her life all over again in a new house and a new school. This destructive process is called gentrification.

The polished buildings of Home Depot and Facebook that were once home to family parks and schools now stand within walking distance of the chipped, gated and small homes of East Palo Alto. Plastic playgrounds placed on sidewalks and front lawns. Food carts on the cracked street corners. Hondas and Acuras strategically placed bumper to bumper.

The Ravenswood School District is the public school system that serves students in East Palo Alto and the eastern section of Menlo Park. Every school in the Ravenswood District shares the same goal of keeping the children of East Palo Alto safe, on track and in school. One specific school in this district that continues to change and improve the lives of hundreds of East Palo Alto students is the San Francisco 49ers Academy.

The 49ers Academy opened in the fall of 1996 as a public middle school located in East Palo Alto. The program expanded to high school in 2014 and continues to provide services to students from grades 6-12. Michele Sharkey, the founder and executive director of the 49ers Academy, knew from a young age that she wanted to work in the East Palo Alto public school system: “I grew up in Palo Alto right across the freeway and it was really eye-opening to me to see the different opportunities kids were afforded just based on their address.” Sharkey’s constant effort to support children in their education and their everyday lives is very similar to that of many women and men all around the Bay Area who have spent their time and money to aid East Palo Alto students as teachers, librarians, counselors, administrators and more. Kendra Gragg, an eighth grade reading intervention teacher at the 49ers Academy has a very similar experience: “[I became involved in this school district] through my placement with Teach for America, so that program targets under resourced districts, so I knew going into my teaching career that I wanted to serve underperforming or under resourced districts that were in need and so the program that I was with placed me at the 49ers Academy” (Gragg). The constant drive for improvement as well as support by the staff of the Ravenswood School District has made schools a safe haven for the students of East Palo Alto, “[The] school community is wonderful, it's really family-like, it's an amazing and supportive environment and we love our kids” (Sharkey). One promise to the kids that the 49ers Academy keeps is that everyone has the backs of students and is there to support them. The community of the schools in East Palo Alto is nothing but a

positive and supportive environment. But due to gentrification and housing insecurities, the schools are in danger of losing that.

Gentrification is the process of renovating properties and moving people with a higher income into an area, raising property values as well as rent, forcing the current, lower-income residents out. In an article published by the *Stanford Daily*, the author puts an emphasis on the tech boom in the Silicon Valley and how many tech companies have moved their headquarters and office buildings into lower income communities such as East Palo Alto, and their employees have moved as well, causing a housing crunch in the already financially stressed town. An article from the *San Francisco Examiner* calls these attractive cities, such as East Palo Alto, “opportunity zones”, where tech companies have the opportunity to develop a underdeveloped city. The process of gentrification spreads like a disease. It starts slowly with early symptoms such as population increase and then quickly spreads until it expands over an entire city and affects everyone inside of it.

Gentrification has many detrimental effects on the cities and people it touches. To begin, gentrification has brought financial crises to families, schools and businesses that have always called East Palo Alto their home. As a result of the move of large technology companies such as Facebook into the area, employees find the lower priced homes a more attractive option than other much more expensive communities in Silicon Valley. Due to the invasion of a more affluent population into East Palo Alto’s traditionally lower income community, current residents are forced to leave their homes and neighborhoods, taking their children with them. Since the

schools in East Palo Alto depend on enrollment numbers for funding, when more and more students are forced to leave, the schools are funded less and less. According to Sharkey, “Gentrification is a huge issue here in East Palo Alto and really over the last 5 years you're really seeing the negative effects, it's a double whammy for the public schools, your kids are being pushed out, so our community, our low-income families can no longer afford to live here so we're losing enrollment which means losing dollars for the public school but then you're also seeing on the flip side, the students that stay in the community are becoming increasingly stressed in terms of housing and insecurity trauma, so the schools are faced with declining enrollment which means declining funding and then higher needs with their student population”. Not only does gentrification have an economic effect on residents who are being forced to move, but as Sharkey mentions, it affects the citizens who stay as well. Due to the increase in rent, many families who can afford to stay are forced to spend most of their monthly income on rent alone. Schools in the Ravenswood District must spend more money on supplies and materials since students may not be able to afford them because of the increase in rent. Gragg places an emphasis on the daily struggle most families face, stating, “I mean the families may not have that extra money to spend on school supplies, uniforms, shoes, you know so they just don't have means to provide all the things our students need on a day to day basis, which we try to then support some of that”.

Gentrification can also have an immense emotional and social impact on those it affects, especially young people. Students are being forced to leave their community, their friends and

their schools because their families can no longer afford to stay there. When a student is forced to drop everything and start over in a new place where they don't know anyone, the emotional stress and trauma can have negative effects on academic performance and mental well being. An article from *The Mercury News* discusses the concept of homelessness that hangs over the students' heads and how that can add emotional stress and trauma to a naturally stressful time in life. Students affected by the process of gentrification are held to the same expectations as students in the rest of the Bay Area, yet they are not given the same resources. Sharkey explains the apparent inequality: "Gentrification impacts our students socially by really creating an unstable environment in their community, so their friends are leaving, they may have to move out of their home, they may have to be sleeping on someone's couch, or in a garage, or in a car just to stay at their home schools. So that really affects your ability to be involved in social activities, you can't be on a soccer team after school, or in a club, or do all the things that build community and the social aspects of school, you're just not able to do it". Menlo Atherton High School sophomore Julissa Moreno believes that gentrification causes dramatic changes in a community. "It pushes people out, people that have been living here all their lives," she says, "...there's so many families I know that get sad because all of their memories are here and they are forced to move hours away from their community." Oxford Day Academy sophomore Deshaun Jordan agrees with the idea of the harmful effects gentrification place on a community. Jordan discusses knowing students who are unable to stay and get extra help from teachers after school, or who are unable to come to community organizations or events because they live too

far away. This forced displacement is taking the community and support away from young people who need it the most.

“Gentrification is going to grow no matter what. It's always going to grow. We can't stop that” (Moreno). Students and families are aware of the inevitable truth that gentrification will not magically stop one day, so they are facing the problem head on. With the passion and drive to overcome, the community can come together to fix the many problems that comes with gentrification. In an article posted to *Palo Alto Online*, East Palo Alto citizens, with a variety of ages, ethnicities and gender, are shown to be coming together to take place in marches and rallies to use their voice to spread awareness. Moreno discusses her experience: “When it first came to East Palo Alto there wasn't that much but it keeps growing more and more so it's going to grow no matter what, so at this point it's important to reach to people and try to get them to be part of solving the problem. It's all on us. If we don't raise our voice then nothing's going to happen and they're going to think it's okay for gentrification to be coming into our community”. The students of East Palo Alto believe that the people who are capable of fighting and minimizing gentrification are the people who it affects the most. Both Moreno and Jordan believe that you must fight for the change you want to see, which is exactly what they are doing. “I feel like who has the power to fight gentrification, I feel like its us, and us getting our voice out and it's just like us coming together and having the confidence, having the energy, having the courage to come together and just fight for it all, and make your voice go out and speak on the topic too” (Moreno).

The citizens of East Palo Alto hope to see fewer families being forced to leave their homes and their neighborhoods due to gentrification. They hope to see families return who were forced to leave everything behind. Jordan addresses the misconception that the current residents of his town do not want new people coming in, “I want you to know more about the city you're moving into because, in a way, it affects us...You're walking around and acting like oh, everything's okay, but are you greeting your neighbors? Are you trying to get to know them? And are you protecting them?”. Jordan believes that as long as one respects and understands the culture of the community into which one is moving, anyone should be able to move in and play just as big a role as other residents of the city. It is important for people to stick together and to take care of each other because this problem isn't going to be solved without a united group of people who care about this issue and who are passionate for change and equality. The students and young people deserve nothing less.

The students from lower income communities deserve the same education and opportunities as the rest of the students in the country. To take a student's financial background or address into consideration when it comes to the quality of education that they deserve is completely unfair. Everyone must come together and educate themselves on the topic of gentrification and use their voice to speak out for those that deserve more than they receive. “Because the kids here are brilliant and talented and amazing, they just need that equal opportunity and equal access” (Michele Sharkey).

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