A Bus Tour Through History

Diane Hess, Education Director of the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, had one seat left and invited me along to “Fasten Your Seat Belts…It’s Been a Bumpy Ride. A Tour of Portland’s Hidden Discriminatory History”. Being a relative newcomer to Portland (15 years) I knew just a little about Oregon’s sad history and in recent years learned more about the Japanese American internment experience. The bus tour added and enhanced my understanding. It may be one thing to read about history but to actually see where it happened and hear the stories truly makes the history real.

Our group met at the Oregon Opportunity Network parking lot. Oregon Opportunity Network is a non-profit organization dedicated to provide affordable housing and economic opportunities for working families, seniors and people with disabilities. We got on the bus and headed out to the Convention Center where we passed the sculpture, “The Dream” of Martin Luther King Jr. with a child and an immigrant. Diane said that the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was the hardest of the Civil Rights Acts to pass. Even today only 1 out of 10 instance of housing discrimination is reported. It is illegal to discriminate based on race, color, religion, national origin, gender, disability, or familial status. Oregon also added marital status, source of income, sexual orientation including gender identity, honorably discharged veterans / military status, and domestic violence victims.

The bus turned up North Williams passing Legacy Emmanuel Hospital and blocks of chain link fenced off empty lots, once a vibrant African American community of business, homes, and churches but now abandoned to urban renewal that didn’t materialize. We learned about neighborhood covenants that excluded African Americans and Asians and discriminatory practices by banks and insurance companies called redlining.

We got off the bus at Vanport and Ed Washington, the Community Liaison for Diversity Initiatives at Portland State University, described his carefree childhood in Vanport. The huge housing development had segregated apartments but integrated schools and recreation centers. It was a grand adventure for the kids but quite difficult for his mother who had to adjust to moving cross country with 5 children to a small apartment.

Next stop was the Expo Center in front of the torii gates designed by Valerie Otani. Torii signifies sacred places and although the Expo Center’s history as the temporary internment site is not sacred, it is a memorial to all those unjustly held. The brilliant Fall light sparkled off the thousands of silver tags but were quiet in the breezeless day. I read the newspaper articles etched in the bases of the torii and the racist epithets, so commonly used in the 1940s, stung.

(Valerie Otani shares her story at the Expo Center Torii)

Rolling along to New Columbia which replaced the aging Columbia Villa housing. New Columbia master planned community now includes a mix of affordable rentals, single family homes, senior housing, an elementary school, a Boys & Girls Club, and a community garden. Tucked into the community are pocket parks. What's nice about New Columbia is that it better integrates with the Portsmouth neighborhood by connecting streets and sharing enrollment in the elementary school and the Boys & Girls Club.

(Ku Klux Klan in Oregon during the 1920s; August 2, 1921, photograph from the Portland Telegram.)

Diane informed us that Oregon had the highest Ku Klux Klan membership in the country and many prominent lawmakers and judges were KKK. The PGE Park site was where the Klan held their rallies. I learned that in the hills around the Multnomah Athletic Club were terraced Chinese vegetable gardens. But the city wanted them out for other development. Imagine how different it would be to actually have sustainable gardens in Southwest Portland.

(Chinese garden and shanties at present-day S.W. Salmon & 18th, c.1905.)

Dr. Randy Blazak of Portland State University and Chair of the Coalition Against Hate Crimes took us back to the scene where Mulugeta Seraw was murdered in 1988. The narrow Southeast street with boxy apartment buildings probably looked the same as on that terrible night when skinheads beat Seraw to death. The crime shone a light on violent racists and resulted in the creation and enforcement of Oregon's hate-crime laws. One positive result of the civil suit was to provide for the education of Mulugeta Seraw's son in Ethiopia, who is now a successful pilot.

The tour ended with Diane pointing out that housing discrimination can also occur around disabilities or family status. Any housing built after 1981 must meet design and construction qualifications for accessibility for people with disabilities. It is also unlawful to discriminate against renting to people with children.

This was an eye opening experience to get on the bus and learn from the experiences of the past and to be aware of discriminatory practices today. Lest we think this is all behind us, Kentucky Senator-elect Rand Paul, recently said that he opposes the Fair Housing Act because a free society should allow private discrimination. And finally, I'm glad I jumped at the opportunity to take the bus ride as it enriched my understanding of how far Oregon has come and to appreciate the legacy of what those who went before us.

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