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September 23, 2001

Integrated Community Is Part of Trend Toward Suburban Segregation

By JAYSON BLAIR

CELEBRATION, Fla. — Seven years ago, when the Walt Disney Company transformed wetlands here into a suburb, executives promised to do their best to ensure that this community would not become as racially homogenous as many other towns.

To do that, the company placed advertisements in newspapers and magazines that catered to African Americans and Hispanics, printed brochures featuring minority members and held a lottery for home lots that developers could not discriminate based on race. Those efforts have been a failure, local officials say so.

The 2000 census numbers released this year say it all: the 2,376-resident community is 91 percent white in a county that is only 59 percent white; it is 1 percent black and 7 percent Hispanic, while Celebration that is 6 percent black and 29 percent Hispanic.

Immediately surrounding Celebration are neighborhoods and towns made up largely of white and Hispanic residents. This has placed Disney in the difficult position of having to defend its suburban creation. More than that, Celebration, just a few miles south of Walt Disney World, has become an example of a trend away from integration that social demographers say only became evident in the analysis of the census.

Diversity was an ambitious goal, said Peter O. Muller, an urban geographer at the University of Albany who has studied Celebration and cites it as an example of how people are increasingly separating themselves from others who look like themselves.

"The trend toward racial balkanization, particularly in the suburbs of the Sun Belt and other parts of the country, I think made it wishful thinking," Mr. Muller said.

Segregation has increased from 1990 to 2000 in almost every large suburban area, from Milwaukee to metropolitan New York, said the Lewis Mumford Center at the University of Albany, a research center that specializes in demographics. What makes the experience here so striking is that the town was not immune to that pattern despite the efforts of Disney, which remains the primary force in running the town.



Michelle V. Agin
 Although the Walt Disney Company...

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In many respects, Disney went to extraordinary lengths to foster diversity in Celebration, which it built to fulfill Walt Disney's vision of an ideal community, at the same time that it wanted to expand into real estate. In late 1995, when the sales office for Celebration opened, Donald Killoren, the Disney executive in charge of the \$2.5 billion, 10,000-acre development, emphasized the company's interest in economic and ethnic diversity. Mr. Killoren said that \$600-a-month apartments would be built alongside \$700,000 colonial revival houses and the community's sprawling golf course. He said that the first 350 houses and 123 apartments would be chosen by lottery to prevent racial dis-

Company planned
a racially balanced
community that is
88 percent white
and that is only 59 percent

Disney officials had black workers in the sales office to help prospective black home buyers feel comfortable. But fostering diversity in a real town has proved much harder than socially engineering a theme park designed by Walt Disney Imagineers.

But few blacks or Hispanics attended the open houses or signed up for the housing lottery. The community started off mostly white. Only 12 of Celebration's 1,093 houses and apartments were bought by blacks, according to the census, and the few minority workers who are seen here are housekeepers and service workers.

Some critics say they believe that Disney at best made several missteps, and at worst made a halfhearted effort to ensure racial and economic balance. These critics point to the fact that in building subsidized houses and apartments for low-wage earners, Disney gave surrounding Orange County \$900,000 to help area residents buy houses under \$80,000. All of the money went to areas outside Celebration. Market forces have driven the prices on the rental apartments here to \$600 a month.

"I feel they left out diversity, and I feel they did it on purpose," said Viva Matthews, a black woman who runs an antique shop here, who lives 10 miles away. "I would not want to live here. They are not comfortable with us and I am not comfortable with them."

Milan Payne, a hotel worker in nearby Orlando who said he had looked for a place to live here but found it uncomfortable with the atmosphere, summed up the sentiment of many blacks in neighboring communities when he said, "It's just amazing how the community keeps growing, but it's not any more diverse."

But many demographers and experts in housing discrimination say that even the best intentions would have been thwarted by the decade-old national trend toward suburban segregation in the South and the Sun Belt.

"They made a bona fide effort," said Edward J. Blakely, a black professor and dean of the Graduate School of Management at the New School University in New York, and the co-author with Mary Gail Snyder of "Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States" (Brooklyn: Institution Press, 1997). "They were just thwarted by national trends, including the fact that when it comes to integration, being a pioneer is not an experience that a lot of people are looking for anymore."

Robert Tennebaum, the real estate development director at the University of Maryland and a former developer who helped design Columbia, Md., a community noted for its racial diversity, said that Disney officials might have underestimated the amount of effort necessary.

In Columbia, for example, officials paid both black and white families to move into different neighborhoods to keep areas from segregating, Mr. Tennebaum said. But the overarching trend here, he said, probably had to do with the new demographic trends.

"You would have a hard time doing a Columbia today," he added. "In the 1960's we were idealistic and even promised to create an open community before federal law required it. That idealism has dissipated."

Perry J. Reader, the president of the Celebration Company, a Disney subsidiary that holds several seats on the town council, acknowledged that Disney's efforts to bring diversity here had been limited. "Even though we are not as diverse as we would like to be," Mr. Reader said, "I think it is clear that the community recognizes that."

Asked what the company might do to address the issue, he said that officials were considering building cheaper housing for retirees. He said they had not decided what to do about the disparity.

The issue of diversity has become so contentious here that it has been brought up in town meetings and on a Web site for community residents. In one exchange on the Web site a resident said he "can't complain" that there were few blacks or Hispanics here.

"It is generally peaceful and quiet here and it even looks like the perfect American community," a resident wrote. "Our homes cost a lot more but any honest person would have to admit that the charm of buying here is living a life style that mimics what most American families could enjoy. No ethnic or racial problems in sight here."

Tobi Santagado, who is Jewish and lives here with her two children and husband, does not say her neighbors are prejudiced, but says they are too quick to associate minority people with crime.

Ms. Santagado, who has diversity in the platform for her campaign to win a seat on the town council, she fears that Celebration's homogeneous atmosphere will not prepare its children for the diverse world outside its white picket fences.

"A black family toured a house on the block recently," she said. "And I said to the real estate agent, 'I hope you sell it to them, because we need somebody.'"

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