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Steve Cutri / Special to The Detroit News

Shaker Heights High School instructor Elizabeth Blakeslee-Vokes hugs Janell Sterett as Andrea Martin looks on. The city has made integration a conscious goal.

Shaker Heights: City works at integration

Diverse population draws residents to Ohio suburb

By Oralandar Brand-Williams / The Detroit News

SHAKER HEIGHTS, Ohio -- The grove trees and surrounding lakes conjure up a scene straight from a Thomas Kinkadee painting.

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Cozy wooden colonial homes surround pristine lakes. The homes, ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000, are as diverse as the population.

When the Shaker Heights Raiders play a home high school football game on Saturday afternoon, the bleachers at Russell Rupp Field are a collage of black, white, Asian and Hispanic families, their children marching in the school's 200-member band.

In this suburb east of Cleveland, race has a different meaning than in many places in Metro Detroit: Integration is the major goal here.

"It's very diverse," says Erica Weiss, a 40-year-old mother of two. "When I associate with people in this area. I feel very comfortable."

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Weiss, who is Korean and whose husband was raised in a white Catholic and Jewish household, says Shaker Heights' diversity convinced her it was the place to raise her children.

"I couldn't imagine them going to college and not being exposed to a place like this," Weiss said.

Promoting integration

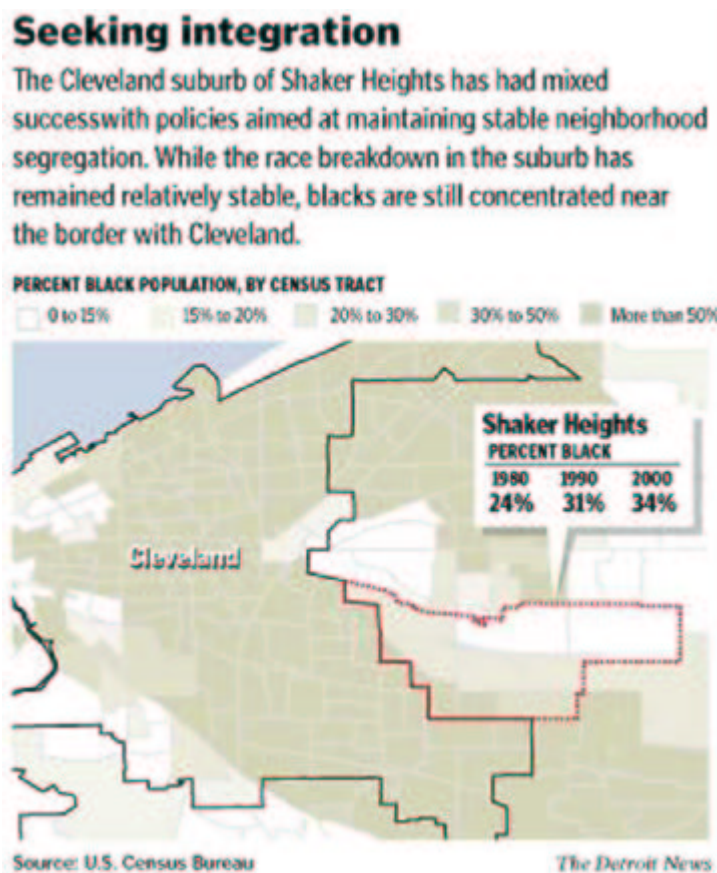
In Shaker Heights, the city promotes its efforts to integrate. Pamphlets welcoming new residents scream diversity as the faces of black and white children jump out from the pages promoting the suburb's public school district.

About 34 percent of Shaker Heights' 31,000 residents are African American, according to the 2000 census. In the Metro Cleveland area, blacks make up 19 percent of the population.

The Shaker Heights school district is evenly split racially with black students making up 50 percent of Shaker Heights' public school students.

Like Weiss, Eric and Julie Good considered the suburb's commitment to racial diversity a draw.

"I didn't want my kids to grow up in a starch white environment," said Julie Good.



Shaker Heights wasn't always so keen on racial integration, however. The racial change came about in the 1950s following a 1948 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed restrictive racial covenants.

Shaker Heights did not see racial integration in earnest until the early 1960s.

Demographers fear that like many other integrated communities, racial integration in Shaker Heights could be waning.

"The biggest threat to an integrated community is resegregation," says Chip Bromley, a fair housing advocate and executive director for the Metro Strategy Group in Cleveland Heights.

"There's a sense of fatigue of it all and a sense that whites will give up on it ... that they'll escape," Bromley said.

Robin Johnson says she would stay in the suburb even if the racial makeup changed.

"I never really thought of it as an issue," says Johnson, a 40-year-old chief financial officer for a Chicago-based social service organization. "We wouldn't move as long as it stays as strong as it is."

Johnson, who commutes to Chicago twice a month for her job, says she actually returned to Shaker Heights four years ago to raise her children, an 11-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son.

Johnson said she's not concerned about others' worries that Shaker Heights might lose its diversity as more blacks begin to move out and more whites pull their children from the area's public schools.

"I don't stay in terms of 60-40 split. I stay here because of what I get from Shaker Heights ... good schools, good housing," said Johnson, who is part black and part white.

Shaker Heights city officials work hard at trying to keep its racial diversity intact.

In 1985, a group of corporations and philanthropic donors created the Fund for the Future of Shaker Heights, which encourages pro-integrative home purchasing in the city by offering loans for down payments to both blacks and whites who move into segregated areas in the city.

"To some people the money makes a difference (and) to others it encourages people to look where they otherwise might not have looked," said Virginia Benjamin, president of the Future fund.

So far this year, the Future fund has granted \$181,000 in loans to home buyers.

On a Saturday afternoon last August, Shaker Heights Mayor Judy Rawson visited several block parties where the smell of kielbasa mixed with that of hamburgers and hot dogs.

Neighbors filled the street and mingled, discussing recent renovations to their homes and local politics.

In one neighborhood, the racial and ethnic diversity is quite evident, while in another area it is less obvious.

Race is an issue that Shaker Heights is not afraid to confront, Rawson said.

"It's something you have to be sensitive to and this community talks constantly about race," Rawson said, between handshakes and hugs with residents of Ardmore Street.

"We talk quite frankly about racial impact because we want to have racial diversity in every area of the community," Rawson said.

Thirty years ago, school teacher Richard Zasa moved to Shaker Heights because of the city's commitment to racial integration. It's a decision he's

still happy about.

"When we found out we were going to have a child I said, 'We can't live like this' so we moved here," Zasa said. "We wanted our children to live like the real world."

Zasa's children are 30 and 32 years old now.

"I still recall my son saying when he was a freshman at Miami University they were prepared for the diversity at school because of where they grew up," Zasa said.

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