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The Struggle for Fair Housing in Cleveland Heights: Responses to the St. Ann Audit

By Sven H. Dubie

Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part series on the historic initiatives to build and sustain an equitable, open and diverse community in Cleveland Heights. Part one examined the historical circumstances and changing racial landscape in Cleveland Heights in the second half of the twentieth century that gave rise to the St. Ann Audit. Part two details the findings of the audit and the community's strong response to its conclusions.

When a small group of women from St. Ann Church formed the St. Ann Social Action Housing Committee in 1971, their goal was simple: The parishioners wanted to investigate allegations of racial discrimination in housing access and the real estate industry in Cleveland Heights. Led by Sue Nigro and backed by dozens of volunteers, the St. Ann Committee, as the group came

informally to be known, conducted a housing audit in the spring and summer of 1972 to collect evidence of discrimination in access to housing. The findings of the audit, released in the late summer of 1972, proved deeply troubling to a community that prided itself on its openness and diversity, forcing business and civic leaders, as well as private citizens to reexamine their own racial attitudes and to address more squarely the insidious nature of housing discrimination. It was unsettling and difficult work, but the civic response that transpired over the ensuing months and years stands as model of grassroots self-evaluation and reform of which our community can be rightfully proud.

When all the data from the St. Ann Audit were gathered, they revealed clear

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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

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Heights Community Congress

The St. Ann Audit

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racial bias and discriminatory practices in the real estate business in Cleveland Heights. Indeed, instances of discrimination were documented at each of the ten companies covered by the audit. Additionally, the audit found that “steering” (i.e., using race to direct clients toward or away from particular communities) was commonly practiced by seven of the ten companies, confirming Nigro’s own experiences when she was discouraged from looking at properties in the Heights in the 1960s. The audit further revealed that white and black clients received very different treatment from realtors. For instance, a white client was much more likely to get a callback from a realtor than a black client; whites were usually shown a wider range of homes; and whites were taken on as clients much more quickly than were their black counterparts. In sum, not only did it appear the letter of the law set forth in the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 was being violated in the Heights, but the spirit of the law was being thwarted as well.

Reports on the audit’s findings were prominently featured in both the *Sun Press* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in September 1972, and the revelations rocked the community. Many in the Heights were dismayed by the reports of pervasive discrimination and, as the St. Ann Committee hoped, residents saw the audit as a call to action. Others however, particularly in the real estate industry, were angered by the findings and felt they had been blindsided by the study. Indeed, some accused the Social

Action Housing Committee of being nothing more than a cabal of troublemaking housewives. City government in Cleveland Heights acknowledged the significance of the findings of the St. Ann Committee, but obviously was embarrassed by the evidence of widespread housing discrimination in a city

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that touted itself as welcoming people of all races. Nevertheless, it would take several years before the city developed and implemented a plan to address the housing situation.

Making Reform Happen

It was not the nature of those on the St. Ann Committee simply to spotlight a problem and leave others to grapple with solutions. Rather, the Committee, anticipating a sharp reaction to its audit and desiring to work constructively toward the resolution of serious social and political problems, developed a set of specific proposals to address the problems their report exposed. Toward this end it made a series of recommendations, including that the government of Cleveland Heights:

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How to stop steering is CH council topic

Eight recommendations designed to end alleged discriminatory real estate practices were made to Cleveland Heights City Council Monday.

The recommendations came from the social action commission of St. Ann Parish that two weeks ago charged that realtors were steering prospective buyers to and from specific areas.

The report compiled by commission volunteers charged that 10 real estate companies, not based in Cleveland Heights but operating there, were steering blacks to Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights, and away from other communities.

Presenting the recommendations were Tom Reim, chairman of the commission, and Sue Nigro, chairman of St. Ann's social action housing committee.

The recommendations were:

USE THE FORCE and ingenuity of the city, to enlist the active and positive support of all the eastern suburbs for truly open housing in their communities.

ENACT and enforce local legislation prohibiting the practice of steering.

ENCOURAGE citizens to report all instances of steering and other forms of discrimination, so legal action can be taken, and ask the city's legal department to consider legal action against real estate agents who slander the city.

STRENGTHEN the city's housing office and develop a citizens housing commission to work with the housing office.

DEVELOP a human relations educational program to counter "myths, fears and hostile attitudes" relating to integrating the community.

(See Page A-3)

Sun Press 9-21-72.

The St. Ann Audit

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- Take a proactive role in addressing the issue of housing discrimination and promote compliance with all federal, state, and local fair housing laws.
- Enact and enforce legislation prohibiting the practice of steering.
- Strengthen its housing department to help enforce laws and identify instances of discrimination.
- Help develop educational programs to promote positive attitudes about integration.

Central to the implementation of these recommendations was the concurrent establishment of the Heights Community Congress (HCC), a private interfaith initiative begun in late 1972 by leaders of local Catholic, Jewish and Protestant congregations, and held at the Carmelite Monastery. These sessions led to the creation of the Heights Interfaith Council, whose purpose was to promote inter-denominational social action across a range of issues, but especially with respect to racial integration. As reaction to the St. Ann Audit spread, the Interfaith Council sought specifically to create an organization to promote open housing, leading to the formal organization of the HCC in early 1973. This marked a milestone in the struggle for social justice in Cleveland

Heights, as there is perhaps no organization that has played a greater role in promoting

equal access to housing and racial integration in the Heights than the HCC.

That the initial mission of the HCC was to promote open housing in the Heights was made evident by virtue of its sponsorship of the Heights Housing Service, an agency tasked with sustaining the audit work of the St. Ann Committee and funded by the City of Cleveland Heights. Appropriately, Sue Nigro, the driving force behind the St. Ann Audit, was named director of the Housing

In light of the collaborative efforts of the city and grassroots organizations such as HCC, Cleveland Heights was twice named an All-American City for its creative and constructive efforts to address serious issues impacting the community.

Service. Nigro oversaw an extensive network of volunteers covering virtually every street in the city. Their mission was to monitor real estate activity in their immediate neighborhood to help ensure that discrimination did not occur. In light of the collaborative efforts of the city and grassroots organizations such as HCC, Cleveland Heights was twice named an All-American City for its creative and constructive efforts to address serious issues impacting the community.

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In 1976, oversight of the Housing Service was transferred from the HCC to the city itself. Some in HCC expressed reservations about the transfer, fearing that bureaucratic mechanisms would replace the principled commitment to the ideal of fair housing in the operation of the Housing Service. However, such fears were assuaged when the city unveiled a comprehensive plan

to enforce fair housing laws and to promote residential integration. The city plan drew heavily from the St. Ann Committee's recommendations, reflecting its own maturing commitment to the ideal that all people should have fair and equitable access to housing, regardless of race.

HCC Carries On

While the more formal functions related to monitoring real estate practices were transferred to the city, the HCC continued to move forward with its mission to "promote



Realtors answer 'steering' claim

The Cleveland Area Board of Realtors has responded to charges of "steering" blacks and whites into different eastern suburbs. Open housing is everyone's job, the Realtors said.

The 'steering' charge was made recently by a committee of St. Ann's Parish in Cleveland Heights following an audit of the sales practices of 10 prominent real estate companies.

Since issuing the report, the committee has presented its viewpoint to the councils of Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights and intends to follow through with other city councils.

The names of the real estate companies were not made public, the committee said, because it did not want

to point a finger at any particular company.

In its response, the Board of Realtors said "the real basic problem" is "people's attitudes."

See editorial on page A-4

"HOW CAN the real estate agent reflect what is not in the people—that being, the love of other people?" the board asked.

"What is needed," the real estate group said, "is not more reports, not fingerwaving, not table-pounding, but a change in people's attitudes. That is the job of not just St. Ann's, but of all other

people of good will, not just in Cleveland Heights, but all over Cuyahoga County."

Vincent T. Aveni, president of the Cleveland Area Board of Realtors, said the statement represents the feelings of the board and its officers and trustees and is the result of that organization's efforts to discuss the overall problems with the Realtors and Associates in the field.

Seventy-five to 80 per cent of active real estate agents belong to the board, according to Almon R. Smith, executive vice president.

The complete statement follows:

"THE CLEVELAND AREA BOARD of Realtors and its members are tired

of being the 'whipping boys' for every group and individual who feels that the civil rights laws are not being complied with, and we believe that it is now time for a complete statement to be made so that the public can understand where the real responsibility lies and where ultimately these problems must be solved.

(See Page A-2)

Clark answer

Sun Press 10-12-72.

The Sun Messenger

CH 25, 1993

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS • LYNDHURST • MAYFIELD HEIGHTS • MAYFIELD VILLAGE • RICHMOND HEIGHTS • SOUTH EUCLID

Groups, agencies essential to upholding integration

By WENDY ANN HOKE
Staff Writer

Achieving integration in a community is no small feat.

But keeping a community integrated requires the support of neighbors, associations, foundations and advocacy groups.

Tantamount to the ongoing success of Cleveland Heights is the Heights Community Congress.

As executive director Martha Goble explained, "We have two goals for our agency. The legal end is fair housing; the human end is multicultural training. The two go together; we need one for the other."



HCC began as a grassroots effort from St. Ann Church. Soon afterward, several Jewish congregations got involved.

"Out of that group came the first audits," said Kathy Cavanaugh, fair housing coordinator for the program which serves Cleveland

Heights and University Heights.

Goble indicated that real estate agents came up with the terms blockbusting and steering.

"Residents would see movement and many would panic sell. That's why we have a ban on real estate signs in the city. It's hard to believe that more than 20 years later, we are still doing audits," Goble said.

When HCC conducts an audit, it uses volunteers, both black and white couples, who pose as prospective home buyers. The couples have similar backgrounds in terms of education, family and economic status.

"One purpose of the audits is to change behavior and heighten

awareness. We discuss our findings with realtors. Certainly, there are those agents and brokers with a commitment to fair housing. Unfortunately, there are those who are not," Cavanaugh said.

Advocacy is another part of HCC's role in the community.

Special projects coordinator Denise Thigpen works with minority parent groups to talk about why they are not involved and how they can get more involved.

"The report I conducted showed that some felt there needed to be a more personal invitation to get involved," she said. Others felt shut out by those already involved and some still are more issue-oriented,

Thigpen said.

"In Cleveland Heights we've generalized that there are black parents and white parents who see and who don't see," Thigpen said.

That attitude was the springboard to HCC examining the differences among people and how those are articulated.

Anne Smith is the multicultural projects coordinator, heading an increasingly important piece of HCC.

"It formed out of our living rooms where people were looking for a way to formalize interaction between groups. The main focus was to talk about living in an integrated neighborhood," Smith said.

See GROUP page A9

Sun Messenger 3-25-93.

and encourage integrated communities." As part of this work, the HCC has strived to help maintain an open, balanced, and high quality housing market in the Heights; supported a strong, integrated public education system; encouraged grassroots involvement in developing solutions to community problems; and promoted programs and services that respond to the needs of a diverse population. In pursuing these goals over the past three and one-half decades, the HCC has proven to be one of the most valuable and enduring institutional legacies to emerge from the controversy over housing discrimination in Cleveland Heights.

Though the 1968 Fair Housing Act may be the least known of the major civil rights laws of the 1960s, it had a far-reaching impact on cities like Cleveland Heights, where racial discrimination was more subtle. Though few could have anticipated it, Cleveland

Heights emerged in the early 1970s as a bona fide test case of the public's commitment to the idea of fair housing. To be sure, there were moments when that commitment was sorely tested. But thanks in large part to the work begun by a small but highly dedicated group of women, and carried forth with support from countless volunteers who shared their commitment to the ideal of equality, a genuine grassroots movement helped to ensure that the Cleveland Heights experiment in equal housing has enjoyed a remarkable and sustained level of success.

Information for this article has been drawn from several important sources, including: W. Dennis Keating's study of suburban housing integration, *The Suburban Racial Dilemma* (1994); Marian J. Morton's *Cleveland Heights: The Making of an Urban Suburb* (2002); and Suzanne Nigro's *The 1972 St. Ann Audit: Personal Reflections* (2006), issued by the Heights Community Congress.