

Almost 50 years after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, fair housing still elusive in New Orleans

Black families struggle for fair housing

By Katy Reckdahl

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During a visit to New Orleans last week, [civil rights leader Julian Bond](#) recalled his first arrest more than 50 years ago, at a sit-in in Atlanta's segregated City Hall cafeteria. Accompanied by fellow Morehouse College students, Bond was the first to arrive at the cashier, who said the cafeteria only served city employees.

He pointed to a sign outside that said, "City Hall Cafeteria: public welcome."

"We don't mean it," she said.

Even today, Bond said, the same double standard — publicly welcomed, privately scorned — seems to apply with housing.

Although 1968's federal Fair Housing Act was signed into law within a week of the assassination of [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), whose birthday the nation observes Monday, Bond said that nearly five decades later, housing discrimination and segregation remain some of the most persistent barriers to racial equality in America.

For many black families, a suitable house in an integrated neighborhood is still a "distant dream," said Bond, a founder or leader of some of the nation's best-known civil rights groups: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"When you're segregated in housing, you're set aside from the best schools, jobs, the best of everything," Bond said. Researchers have linked segregation to a lack of



FILE - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is seen, in this photo from archives undated and location unknown. Former South African President Nelson Mandela never met with King but the two fought for the same issues at the same time on two different continents. Mandela said in a 1964 speech that he was prepared die to see his dream of a society where blacks and whites were equal become reality. King was killed by an assassin's bullet while working for that same dream. (AP Photo-File)

access to fresh food, transportation, green space, good jobs and good schools.

And segregation, while no longer the law of the land, remains pervasive, both around the nation and in New Orleans. A Brown University analysis found that housing segregation in the New Orleans metropolitan area has decreased slightly since 2000 but that segregation within the city limits itself actually has increased slightly.

Headway on the issue also proved elusive for King a half-century ago.

In 1966, King declared the start of the Chicago Freedom Movement, with demands that centered largely on access to jobs and what King called “open housing.” The campaign shed light on widespread discrimination by real-estate agents and landlords and helped provide more assets to black-owned banks.

But in the end, it did little to put black families into more integrated neighborhoods, and King himself characterized the work as unfinished.

“There have been no earth-shaking victories, but neither has there been failure,” he said in a 1967 speech. “Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity.”

The most lasting legacy of King’s housing push may be the Fair Housing Act, which spurred the creation of organizations like the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, which hosted Bond’s speech last week at the Carver Theater.

Like its peers, the center traditionally has fought housing discrimination by filing complaints on behalf of individual victims, said its executive director, James Perry. But after Hurricane Katrina, the center sought to take on more systemic discrimination, taking aim at prohibitions on multifamily housing in St. Bernard Parish and filing suit on behalf of former St. Thomas housing complex residents unable to return to the mixed-income River Garden complex. It also successfully sued the Road Home program for basing its grants formula on pre-storm property values, which were lower in majority-black neighborhoods.

Advocates in other cities have told Perry they expanded their scope as the result of New Orleans’ successes. “They began to realize that these cases are just as important, maybe more, than individual cases,” he said.

The center’s deputy director, Kate Scott, said the center is pushing the region’s housing authorities to help Section 8 recipients get out of the high-poverty neighborhoods where most still live. The center also is keeping a close watch on the sale of key Housing Authority of New Orleans scattered-site properties like the Mazant-Royal complex in Bywater, where affordable housing is in diminishing

supply.

John Logan, a Brown University sociologist, said the problems with segregation in housing go beyond economics.

“It’s not that black people can’t afford to be in a better neighborhood,” he said. In fact, Logan’s analysis of New Orleans data found that the average affluent black family, defined as earning more than \$75,000, lives in a neighborhood with a poverty rate of 17.1 percent. Meanwhile, the average low-income white household, earning less than \$40,000, lives in a neighborhood that is only 14.5 percent poor.

Logan has found similar patterns across the nation. What it proves, he said, is that even when black families make enough money, they’re often not escaping lower-income neighborhoods. He believes that hints at other causes, such as discrimination.

The Fair Housing Action Center last year tried to test that hypothesis locally, sending pairs of equally qualified testers — one white, one black — to seek apartments in low-poverty, predominantly white neighborhoods such as Lakeview, Uptown near Audubon Park and Algiers Point. The center found that 44 percent of the time, black testers were treated more shabbily than their white counterparts, with landlords not returning phone calls or refusing to provide rental applications.

Without such studies, the issue is murky, Bond said. “Most of us think of these choices as voluntary, as people saying, ‘I want to live here,’ ” he said, noting that many people do choose to live in the neighborhoods where they grew up or where they have family. But repeated surveys have found that most black families prefer integrated settings.

As Bond walked out of the Carver Theater, a young immigration-rights advocate, Nadia Salazar, asked him how her movement can be as successful as he and his colleagues were.

“You need to do more,” Bond said. “You need to engage others. Yell more loudly. You just have to do more.”

She nodded and said thank you.

“Report back to me in a year,” Bond said.