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Newsday's Les Payne, center, Jim Watkins of WPIX Channel 11 at left, and WNYC's Brian Lehrer during a Democratic mayoral debate in August, 2001.

A second named plaintiff in the case, Carlos Flores, now 54, was convicted of sec-

claims. A spokesman for the state did not return a call for comment.

GETTY

Firefighters joined the FDNY in 2003.

Steering blacks away from the good life

Editor's Note: Les Payne, a former top editor at Newsday who died Monday, wrote a weekly column in these pages for many years. This column was published on March 23, 1980.

BY LES PAYNE

"Steering." It is such an easy-gliding, harmless-sounding, mechanical kind of word. In American house-shopping though, racial steering is as standard as multiple listings.

Like most of this country's subtle improvements on de jure segregation, steering exists in that fog between what is legal and what is right. And nowhere has steering become such high art as on Long Island and in the tri-state area of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. The Regional Plan Association recently found that fair housing attempts in this area have totally failed. According to the group's study, two-thirds of all black families in the tri-state region are effectively restricted to 1.5 percent of the residential land by discriminatory land-use policies and zoning, racial steering and ineffective enforcement of fair housing laws.

Little has changed since I was steered to my house in Huntington 10 years ago. With a down payment of $10,000 from my years in the Army, my wife and I shopped at the mercy of a squad of real estate agents who all showed us the same dozen houses. There were stops in Wyandanch, Central Islip, North Amityville, Greenlawn and Huntington Station, all predominantly black neighborhoods.

One East Northport agent had one book for houses under $35,000 and another for those above. Privately, within those books, he kept two indexes, one for whites and a much smaller, coded section for blacks. Once, while driving to our regular stop in Greenlawn, my wife and I confronted the agent about the racial indexing we had discovered while thumbing through his book when he was away from his desk. The agent pulled to the side of Broadway and nervously explained that it would be very difficult for us to buy a house in a white neighborhood on Long Island.

Steering, on Long Island as elsewhere, is as effective as it is sinister. For in this "post-segregation" era, only 10 per cent of American neighborhoods are desegregated, according to sociologist Dorothy K. Newman in her book, "Protest, Politics and Prosperity." Newman also found that black homeowners, all other things being equal, are charged from 3 to 20 per cent more for their dwellings.

The prospects for change in the area of housing are dimmed by the even more powerful and ominous weapons of blockbusting and bank redlining.

As universal as racial steering is in this country, the practice, curiously, is almost universally denied, except by those who are its victims. To deny that steering is widely practiced is like denying that Mayor Ed Koch has a bald head. But every day it is denied, and during an upcoming steering suit against a Nassau County real estate agency, the charge will, no doubt, be denied for the judicial record.

Long Island is not the only place where racial steering is practiced. For every black man, woman, and child in this country knows that it exists and many have had first-hand experiences. My first personal encounter with steering occurred one day in Indianapolis, in 1967.

Sunshine and a cold drizzle had alternately relieved each other throughout that September day. The Vietnam War stood in my life like a giant grizzly, upright and menacing. I was 25, and a newly minted Army captain. For two years I had commanded an air-defense battery, shooting down drones with Nike Ajax missiles in the desert of New Mexico. LBJ had stepped up the war and I was retained on active duty, against my will. And since the Viet Cong had no planes to be shot down, I had been ordered to Saigon to write messages and run the newspaper for Gen. William Westmoreland.

But first, I had to stop at Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Ind., for nine weeks to learn, from the Department of Defense, the craft of journalism. By day, I roamed the creaky, olive-drab halls of the post Information School, learning to write headlines and photo captions. My wife, Violet, and I lived in a small room off post, which cost us $110 a week, a sum no captain could sustain for more than a week without drawing the attention of the vice squad and the IRS. We wanted to spend our last days together before I flew off to the uncertainty of Saigon.

Violet was seven months pregnant with our daughter, Tamara. It was a hard pregnancy, made harder by the soot and grime of Indianapolis and the bloody stories about body counts coming out of Vietnam. Daily she shopped for apartments. Over the telephone we got invitations to visit vacant flats, but upon showing up minutes later, we were told that the apartments had just been rented.

The army gave us a list of apartments whose landlords had forsworn housing discrimination. At the top of the list was an aging apartment in the center of town, which had stood vacant for weeks, a flat where the furnace wheezed noisily but gave up little heat. My wife visited the apartment during the day, and had been greeted warmly by the landlady, a pear-shaped, powder-white woman with eyes as flat and cold as a trout. She mistook Violet for a Eurasian with the good sense to have married a white. Violet rented the apartment with a $50 deposit.

After class, we sped through the night's drizzle and bounced up the stairs to the landlady's flat. When she opened the door I saw the look that I have seen often on the face of my white countrymen. It was the look of rejection, hatred, scorn, dread, contempt, pale ire, even fear. There was no mistaking it. It started in the eyes, flared at the nostrils and worked its way down to her dime-thin lips.

"I'm sorry, the place is rented," she said. "You can have your deposit back."

Violet broke down and cried uncontrollably. I moved up to that threshold where Billy Budd stood just before he struck out at Claggert. I looked deep into the fish eyes of this sad, little old white woman and saw terror lurking there. And at that moment, for the first time, I understood that to be black in America is to be given back your deposit.