

## **Westport: A Bubble Refuses to Pop**

A car drives into Westport, Connecticut. It's something that happens every day, thousands of times, but this one is different. This car is not content to simply speed straight down the Post Road; it wants to get to know this suburbia a bit first before passing through. It travels past well-spaced rows of colonial-style homes, expensive structures on even more expensive plots of land. Each is beautiful, yet invariably similar to its neighbor. Every other street seems to have a razed lot or half-finished house, evidencing the "buy it and build it" mentality that pervades the homeownership. The car leaves our residential areas in favor of downtown, lined with designer clothiers and slightly overpriced restaurants. Upon observing the foot traffic, the car's inhabitants see an almost entirely white population, which they may reasonably guess is mostly Jewish and Christian. There is a peppering of minorities present: some Asians and Indians, an African-American, a Latino work crew. After maybe a half hour of driving our winding, SUV-filled roads, the car leaves.

Is this Westport observed by the car accurate? Is our town truly just a homogeny of soccer moms walking their Golden Retrievers, of businessmen fathers returning at nights or on weekends, of schoolchildren toting their crisp backpacks and brand-new binders? Or is it something more than that, something more complex than the upper-class white community it appears?

This question is hyperbolic, of course. One cannot deny that there exists diversity in Westport. A town resident may live in a 500,000 square foot house, but he or she could also be one of the many inhabitants of our mobile home park. While the town is indeed predominantly Caucasian, it is home to many foreign-born residents, who range from Denmark to Korea to

## Westport: A Bubble Refuses to Pop

Jamaica. And we mustn't forget our diversity of opinion; our recent election of a Republican First Selectman challenges the established idea of Westport as a solid blue town.

But let us not flatter ourselves with how inclusive we are. While the car may have not seen the *full* character of Westport, its observations are on par with what a quick trip to Wikipedia would tell about our beloved town. We may have a trailer park, but a median annual household income of nearly \$200,000 places us at the US's tenth wealthiest midsize town. Likewise, a white population encompassing almost 93% of the town means minorities are both heavily outnumbered and in perpetual contrast to the rest of Westport's citizens. With only 3% fewer Caucasian residents than the nearby town of Darien (which many high schoolers jokingly refer to as "Aryan Darien"), it is hard to deny that this is a town dominated, both in government and in population, by wealthy whites.

The recent US Census tells of a shift in national demographics, of a majority minority" country in just thirty years. The white American population under twenty has already been outnumbered by other ethnicities. Yet residents of Westport at any age have yet to see any significant change in the town's racial makeup. In the areas where this should be most obvious - our school systems - it is not uncommon for students to have multiple classes without a single minority present. This very afternoon, for instance, I had a Science Research class followed by AP Government, both of which are entirely white. And these are not small, niche classes; AP Government is one of the most popular social studies courses in the school, with each class having 25 or more students.

The root causes of this lack of racial diversity are not difficult to see. The minority population of America as a whole is less affluent than their Caucasian counterparts (as of 2009,

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the median wages for African American and Hispanic workers were, respectively, about 65 and 61 percent those of white workers). Keep in mind, too, that the median Westport income per household is nearly quadruple that of the average white American household. And even though the number of minorities in the US is increasing, their economic status as a whole shows little improvement.

It seems plain that Westport's status quo financially prohibits many minority families from residency, and this shows few signs of changing. Westport has long been known as a "bubble" in which our upper-class lifestyle and lack of racial variety has set us apart from even our neighboring towns of Fairfield and Norwalk. What we will see in the coming years, I fear, is not a bursting of this bubble by a sudden influx of minorities, but a thickening of its walls as it resists the change seen by the rest of the nation.

This lack of diversity is a significant weakness in a town known for its strengths, which range from the public school system to its financial well-being. This racial inequality sets Westport back from the rest of the nation in terms of its cultural richness. Yes, our town, ever so recently known as a mecca of culture and art, has been slowly taken over by the *nouveau riche* until its identity has fundamentally changed.

One of Westport's strongest attractions is its school system; it is almost universally agreed to be an excellent place to raise and educate children. But I see this changing very soon, and not for the better. The modern student is expected to be a worldly critical thinker; isolating them in such a homogenous environment can only put them at a disadvantage. If the bubble remains intact, I myself, whose father and grandfather both graduated from Staples, can see little appeal in raising children here.

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Westport is a town in crisis: an identity crisis. To be stuck in an upper-class, all-white town in the coming years will be a significant disadvantage to students. We have little choice but to evolve, or risk losing our appeal as a family-friendly town. Yet the path on which Westport is headed shows, as of yet, no signs of diverging.