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Reaction to racism troubles suburbanite

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Eugene Kane

Evelyn Smith built a house in the village of Germantown because frankly, suburban life suited her.

"I've always wanted to live well," she said. "I've always believed you should want more out of life."

The 63-year-old African-American woman grew up in Milwaukee but has lived in Germantown for more than 12 years.

Before that, she was a longtime resident of Menomonee Falls.

She has seldom encountered problems with her neighbors in the suburbs even though she's usually one of the few blacks around.

"I stay to myself," she said. "I don't bother anybody."

That's why the start of this holiday season exposed Smith to a troubling reality about her adopted hometown.

After a fire of suspicious origin a few weeks before Thanksgiving forced her to temporarily relocate, Smith returned home to find a vile racial slur painted in red across her garage door.

The words left little to the imagination:

"Nigger Don't Come Back."

She had little doubt the vile commentary was aimed at her specifically.

Smith, who works at a local senior center, called me last week in tears and invited me to come see her garage.

I drove out to Germantown on Friday morning. It's about a half-hour drive from Milwaukee, which was actually enjoyable. When you are a city kid at heart like me, it's always a thrill to travel out to the wide open spaces of the 'burbs.

(In the daytime, that is.)

Even covered in a blanket of snow, the view outside my window as I drove into Washington County along Mequon Road on a sun-splashed day was the kind of scene that can make a city-dweller ponder how peaceful life must be outside of the city's concrete and steel jungle.

Almost like paradise, I imagine.

But as Smith's story demonstrated, sometimes there's ugliness beneath the pristine beauty.

After I arrived at Smith's fire-damaged home, she removed a makeshift partition to show me the hateful message in large, bold letters across her garage door.

Surprisingly, Smith wasn't as upset about the vandalism as she was about the village's response to her plight.

"Basically, they told me I would have to paint it over because people were complaining."

She provided me with a copy of the village's anti-graffiti ordinance that was mailed to her. It threatened a fine and other penalties if she didn't comply.

As for the investigation into who committed a possible hate crime on her property, Smith said the local police department had not told her much about any progress.

"They seem more concerned about getting me to paint my garage than finding out who did it," Smith said.

According to Germantown police Chief Peter Hoell, the investigation into the incident, including possible arson involving Smith's home, was ongoing.

He said evidence at the scene was being scrutinized in the crime lab. Currently, there are no suspects.

As for the graffiti, Hoell said there had been numerous complaints from residents about the words painted on Smith's garage.

"We've gotten quite a few calls," he said. "They were wondering why we hadn't taken it down yet."

Smith denied having any ongoing feuds with neighbors or previous bad blood with anybody in the area. Hoell confirmed there were no reports of disturbances involving Smith.

Ken Voight, building inspector for the Village of Germantown, told me the notice sent to Smith was part of the regular procedure to get residents to comply with the anti-graffiti ordinance.

The official reaction to Smith's plight left her confused about priorities in Germantown. She's also confused as to why she was singled out for this racial attention.

"I know there are some people here who don't want blacks out here, but I don't pay that any mind," she said. "I just don't like the harassment."

Her only other overtly racist experience came years ago when she said her son was the brunt of a racial

joke by a teacher at the local high school.

"That really hurt me," she said.

The graffiti on her garage serves as a stark reminder that the hurt is still around.

To this city dweller, it does seem like the Village of Germantown is more concerned about getting Smith to paint her garage to appease her neighbors than finding out who put the racial slur there in the first place.

Smith is currently living in Milwaukee waiting for home insurance to cover costs of repair for her smoke-damaged house. She doesn't want to paint over the garage door until the day she moves back home.

"I want to keep it just like that," she said, defiantly.

Unlike some people in Germantown, she wants to confront this ugly reality and not just cover it up in the hope it will disappear.

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